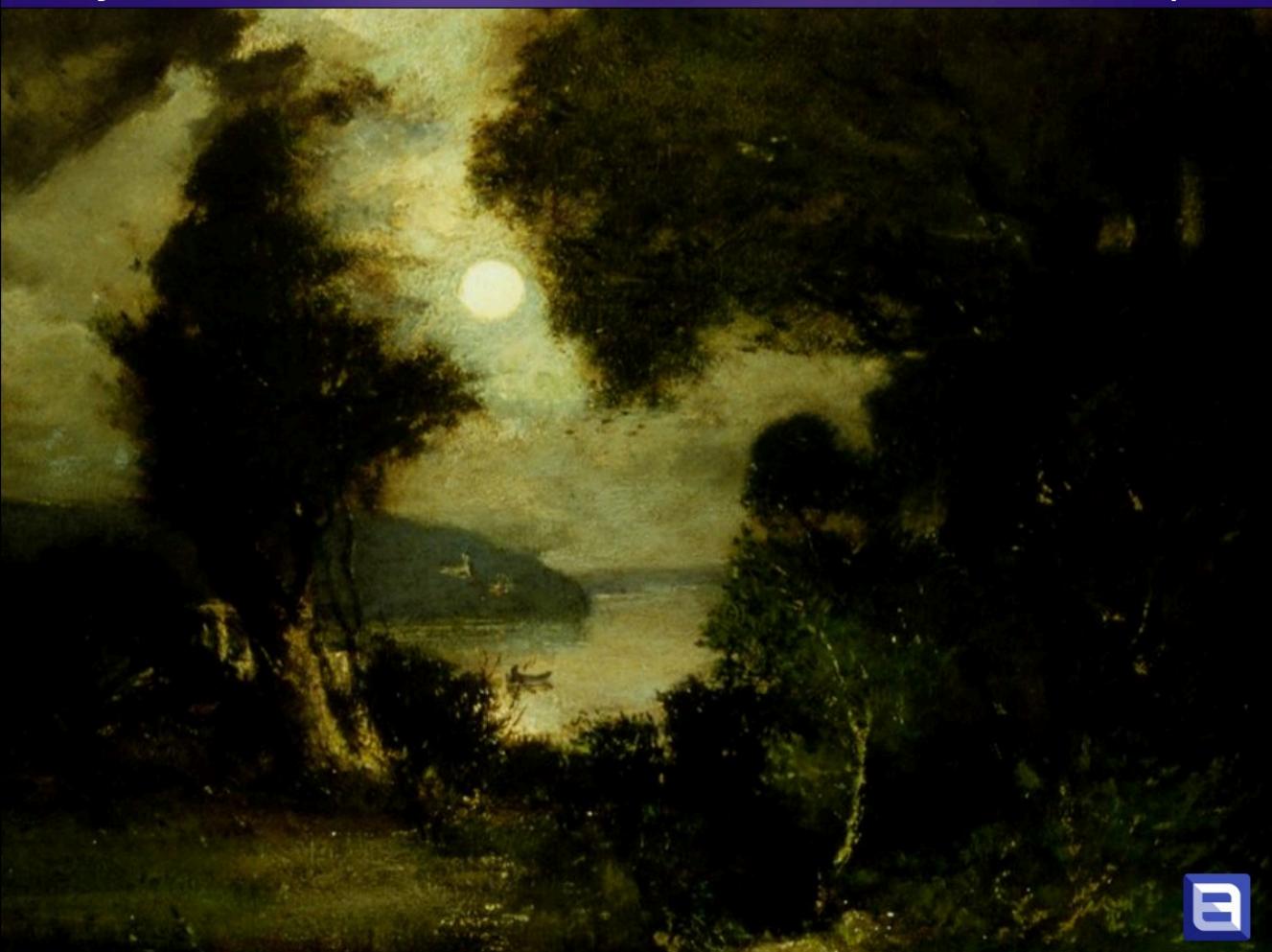


Her Sweet, Decadent Smile

thecellarfloor

Harry Potter

Complete



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Summary

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Description:

"Princess," Draco's voice sliced through the silence, dangerously close to where she was hiding, "I know you're here somewhere." Hermione muffled her ragged breaths. He was clearly enjoying this. "Come out, come out, wherever you are..." A sequel to HBHE

Chapter 1

WARNING : you are now about to read a story written by a person with *questionable sanity*. Draco's positively **devious** here. You don't know what you're getting yourself into.
Don't expect flowers and rainbows and run while you still can.

DISCLAIMER: I don't own anything but the plot.

Please read 'His Beautiful, Haunting Eyes' before reading this. You can find the story on my profile page.

I got one scene from the movie that wasn't in the book.

English is my second language. I'm still trying to figure out how the beta thing works :))

Somebody gave me a link to a Vietnamese translation of HBHE. It's in my page. I'm a little disappointed that you didn't ask for my permission first, translator person. Next time, please ask before you translate. I won't bite :)

annnnnnywaysss... here we go :)

Prologue

She thought she caught a glimpse of someone familiar standing lazily amongst the sea of people in the dance floor.

A flash of blond hair shifted over that side. Another one to her right.

"Ms. Granger?" Her eyes snapped back to the man clad in green robes in front of her, Mr. Vasil Krum, Viktor's uncle. Tall and skinny man he was, holding a wine glass in his right hand and twirling the red liquid nonchalantly. She was certain she drifted into a state of paranoia again, seeing things that weren't supposed to be there.

As if her eyes played tricks on her.

It happened more and more often these days.

She shook her head apologetically, then nodded for Mr. Vasil to continue.

"As I vos saying," He cleared his throat. "Our family is quite a prominent family in Bulgaria. I speak for the entire Krum clan, to remind you to votch your actions from now on ___"

There he was again, the bloke with blond hair, but she wasn't so sure. She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand.

“—Ve can’t have you tainting our family’s flawless reputation with your attention-seeking relationship with Harry Potter—”

“I beg your pardon?” She stared at him disbelievingly, caught off guard by the sudden insulting statement. How rude this man was. “Harry Potter happens to be my best friend. What do you mean *attention seeking relationship*?” She demanded.

“You know vot I mean.”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t. Why don’t you enlighten me?” she said coldly.

He eyed her condescendingly. “Viktor may have accepted you, but it doesn’t mean that ve do. So please, act accordingly and refrain from all these—” he waved his hand to emphasize his point. “—disgusting affairs with famous people.”

She clenched her fists in anger.

“Yes, well, *thank you* for the reminder Mr. Vasil,” she said through gritted teeth. Her sarcasm wasn’t missed, he glared at her before disappearing in the crowd. She really wanted to hex the man, but she knew it would only cause a scene so she stopped herself.

She inhaled deeply, counted to ten and took another glass of wine from a tray floating around the beautifully decorated halls.

The wine was bitter against her lips. She felt it go straight to her stomach. This engagement party was giving her a headache. It wasn’t at all like what she had expected. Seeing all these people dressed in elegance and confidence to brag about their money and status was all very annoying to her.

If she’d had it her way, she wouldn’t have bothered with such a party, but the Krumns had insisted. And they had insisted it be held in Bulgaria as well, leaving Hermione to celebrate her own engagement party with people she hardly knew.

Good thing Harry had promised to go.

Attention-seeking relationship with Harry Potter? *Seriously?* She let out a snort.

She caught Viktor’s eye while he was talking to a group of people, no doubt Quidditch fanatics. He grinned at her and mouthed an ‘I love you,’ before he continued his idle chat with the crowd.

She knew he was uncomfortable with all the attention, but the way he was handling himself to pretend like he was interested while saying less or nothing at all, was rather remarkable. He was a pro at this. She, on the other hand, was anything but. She had tried to mingle a while ago, but decided to give up altogether when the conversations all led to high-society rubbish.

She would have to put up with this every single day once they were married.

She sighed and stared at Viktor once more.

One of these days she was going to have to say it back. They were engaged for the love of Merlin. She shouldn’t put off saying something so trivial like ‘I love you too.’

Avoiding more social-climbing house wives headed towards her direction, Hermione walked outside the huge balcony to get a breath of fresh air. Once she was safely outdoors, she leaned against the railing and gazed at the stars. The air was cold but it felt good against her skin.

“Alright there, Hermione?” said a voice.

“Yeah, just a little tired.”

At least Harry was here now.

“You’re late,” she said in an accusing tone. He grinned sheepishly.

“Why are you out here? You should be inside, socializing.” He leaned against the railing beside her.

She snorted rather loudly. “They think I’m an attention seeking whore.”

Harry chuckled. “This happened once before, in our fourth year. Do what you always do, ignore them. They’re not worth it.”

A small smile played in her lips. He was right. She can’t let these rich snobs get to her.

They didn’t say anything for a long time, but it was fine. His silence was a comforting one, a reassurance. No words. Just his presence. Just enough to let her know he was there. And right now she really needed him.

“I still hear his voice sometimes.”

It came out as a small crack. She was going for something short and casual, but it shocked him nonetheless. It was the first time in five years, she had ever mentioned *him*. Harry didn’t answer but merely continued gazing at the vast fields outside the Krum mansion. She knew he was reminiscing.

“When we were in the tower that night, I saw his eyes,” he whispered finally. “I remember telling myself it was over... that I was finally going to be with my parents. His wand was already aimed at me. Then I heard you say his name.”

She felt uneasy with the conversation. She bit her lip and looked at anywhere but Harry. She was feeling far too embarrassed.

“He looked confused and troubled. And he kept clutching at his chest,” he continued. “I wonder what had happened then? I think he’d changed, bet you anything he had. Shame he had to die the same time.”

Was he really dead? she wanted to ask but stopped herself.

“You’ve done everything you could. No one blames you, Hermione,” he assured her.

His gaze fell on her and he touched her cheek with the back of his hand. He stood straight, bowed a rather dramatic bow, took her hand in his, and ever so gently, he twirled her around.

And suddenly they were dancing.

The whole world seemed to melt away and it was just the two of them. They moved to the music barely audible from where they were, and it was just perfect. Nothing else mattered.

Like the time when they searched for the Horcruxes, the time when they only had each other to hold onto.

Strange how she feels that way right now.

“It’s okay to cry, you know,” he whispered in her ear.

She stiffened immediately, felt herself lean in his shoulders and clutch his arms tight. That’s where he was wrong, Harry was. It wasn’t okay to cry for him. Not at all.

BOOM!

Suddenly everything was in utter chaos. The sudden impact of the explosion caused them to crash to the railings. Harry was quicker than her. He was already on his feet, wand at the ready. She felt a searing pain in her back but she was too stunned to care.

Flames.

Huge, red, dancing flames blazed to the dark sky. They heard roaring, billowing noises. Fiendfyre. She stared in horror as the flames took the shape of fire-breathing monsters and beasts; snakes, chimeras, and dragons, continuously mutating, engulfing the mansion in only a moment’s warning.

“No wait! Hermione!”

She ran to the doors without much thought, shielded herself with every ounce of magic she had. The immense heat immediately burned her skin a little. There were bodies everywhere. People were slowly being devoured by beast-like flames, their tortured screams hurting her ears. They held their burning hands out to her, reached for her, shouted for her to help. She tried to save them but she couldn’t.

There is no countercurse for this.

“Viktor!” she yelled desperately. “Viktor! Answer me!”

She coughed violently as the poisonous fumes entered her lungs. “Her-hermy-own-ninny..” It was a deep, strangled voice.

There he was, his body crushed by a huge chandelier.

“Oh Merlin, Viktor.” She rushed towards him. She cringed at the sight before her. There were burns everywhere. Blood was rushing out of his mouth. His left leg had been sliced off *entirely*.

She blasted the chandelier off him, tried to heal him with everything she had. “Y-you’re going to be alright.” She was trying, she really was. She could see her hand trembling as she clutched her wand. ‘H-hold on.’ He groaned when her magic stung to heal his burns. The tears were all over her face now, but she ignored them. Her whole hand was shaking as it clutched her wand. Her healing charm wasn’t working and his wounds just opened up again. “J-just—” She had to save him. She had to.

She barely noticed him hold her hand weakly, a small gesture telling her that he wanted her to stop. “N-no just-just let me.” She sobbed desperately.

“It’s okay,” he said calmly, brushing her face with his free hand.

For a brief instance, she closed her eyes. As if to remember this moment, to feel him entirely, to feel his touch against her skin.

And that was the last time she saw him smile.

“Hermione!”

Her coughs got more violent, more painful. She felt her shield deteriorating, her magic slipping away. She couldn’t breathe properly anymore. She refused to let go of Viktor’s lifeless form. *This can’t be happening, he can’t be dead.*

“Hermione!”

Someone was standing lazily amongst the dust and debris. He was leaning casually against a stone column, strangely unaffected by the fire, strangely unmoved by the chaos. He was staring at her in faint amusement. His hands were tucked in the pockets of his dark robes. Familiar. She couldn’t make out his features but she knew immediately.

Only one person would be so calm in times like these. *Only one.*

She tried to raise her wand but her body finally gave in, collapsing to the floor from the lack of air. Someone was shaking her roughly, *Harry.* “Stay awake Hermione.” She felt him lift her up. “I’m here. Stay awake!”

“Viktor’s dead, Harry. He killed him,” she kept repeating. “He killed him.”

And the darkness devoured her whole...

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Woah.. Imagine if you were Hermione and you see burning people screaming for you to come save them. Scary shit, man. It’s like you’re in hell or something.

Somehow, people always end up dead when I write stories. Sorry about that. :p

Chapter 2

Your reviews made me feel all tingly inside.

Regarding Draco's persona, I think you should read the story further to find out about it, anyways I think it's rather obvious with all the warnings I'm giving out, right? I warned you.

And Hermione... well... she's strong, I'll give you that, but that doesn't mean I'll make it easy for her.

Why should I? Where's the fun in that? *sniggers*

Oh joy.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"...destroyed the whole mansion, ashes when they found the place! Not a single..."

She shifted to her side, felt the soft bed sheets slip off her slowly but somebody lifted it to her chest again.

"...somebody obviously had it out for the Krumms..."

The headache came a moment later, her head felt like a fragile nail being constantly hammered. She shut her eyes tight in attempts to lessen it.

"...every single one of them, dead..."

She groaned in annoyance, the voices were making the pain worse. Her hand made its way to her forehead.

"...and the fire hadn't chased after her or Harry. That doesn't look—"

"Will everyone please just shut up!" she growled, unable to stand the noise any longer. She slowly lifted her heavy lids and adjusted her eyes to the light. She was in Godric knows where with Godric knows who. The people surrounding her all seemed to have frozen at the sound of her irritated voice.

"Miss Granger, I trust you've rested well?" A voice came from the foot of her bed. She remembered the man as Mr. Alasdair Worden, Head of the Council of Magical Law.

"Obviously not," she snapped angrily, as she felt another searing pain attack her head. "My head..."

"Do you know how to cast and control Fiendfyre?" said someone to her right. The said woman was wearing dark purple robes and there was a stern look on her face, she sort of reminded Hermione of Professor McGonagall.

“W-what?” She tried to get up from but someone immediately pushed her down to the bed again.

Fiendfyre? That was an awfully dark magic right there. Why would someone even ask her such a question?

“Fiendfyre, Miss Granger,” said the McGonagall look-alike again, even with Hermione’s head throbbing she noticed the icy tone in the voice.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand—”

“Oh for the love of Merlin! She had nothing to do with it!” came a familiar, angry voice to her left. “Hermione’s no murderer!”

“A great number of witches and wizards have been wiped out in an engagement party with only the two of you surviving the incident, Mr. Potter. Initially, you are the suspects!”

Confusion flooded over her, causing another prick of pain in her head. She was missing something, she didn’t know what.

“And what, pray tell, would we gain from doing all this?” Harry said with a mocking tone.

“Harry’s right. It makes no sense at all!” said another woman clad in brown.

“Then explain to us vy the fire hadn’t affected them or chased after them!” yelled a man in dark robes and black hat. “There is no countercurse for Fiendfyre and any shield or ward for protection is useless! Either they did it themselves or they are associated with someone who did!”

Then yet another series of yells and accusations emerged from either side of the room, hurting her head even more. She wanted to cover her ears with her pillow and fall back to sleep. Gazing over the dresser beside her bed, she looked for her wand, but it was nowhere to be found.

Damn it all.

“Enough!” she yelled finally. “Enough! All of you!”

Every pair of eyes turned to look at her again. She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at every one of them.

“If you’re done with all these childish rubbish, can someone please explain to me what in Godric’s name is going on?”

The silence stretched, unbearable and awkward. She waited for them to reply. They looked at each other, no one daring to step up and speak for quite a long time.

Then she felt someone touch her hand.

“Viktor’s dead, Hermione,” Harry said sympathetically.

“Viktor?”

“Viktor Krum.” He squeezed her hand tight in genuine concern. “Your fiancé.”

Her what?

“What are you on about, Harry?” She looked at him questioningly. “I don’t have a fiancé. I don’t know what you’re saying.”

Everything went horribly messy after that. They all started another row of angry yells, asking her questions she couldn’t answer and demanding her to tell them everything she remembered about the incident.

Funny thing was, she remembered nothing but blurred faces and blond hair.

Harry was concerned for her most of all. He had explained to her what had happened but it was no use. She couldn’t recall ever knowing a great Quidditch player or a husband-to-be. Her memories of Viktor Krum were completely wiped off. It frustrated her to no end.

She felt absolutely useless... and incomplete.

She wasn’t gravely hurt by the fire, only minor scratches and bruises on her skin. Nobody really knew why she and Harry hadn’t been affected. She’d told them she remembered protecting herself before entering the mansion, but they had said it wouldn’t have worked. The Fiendfyre was far too powerful and even if she had put a ward around herself, the fire would have chased after her until she was tired and dead.

They hadn’t let her go back to her flat, not unless they were a hundred percent certain that nothing else was wrong with her.

So now she felt alone and cold too.

She fidgeted in her hospital bed uncomfortably, trying her hardest to drift into wonderland and dream again. But that’s just the problem with sleep, the harder you try, the less likely you were going to get any. She raised her hand above her face and frowned deeply at the diamond ring on her finger.

It didn’t feel right at all, wearing something like this.

She decided to take it off her and let it rest on the dresser beside her bed.

Her eyes scanned the white walls of the room. She didn’t like it here, it was too... sad. The only redeeming quality of the room was the colorful heaps on the table. A couple of get-well-soon cards and flowers were there. She gazed questioningly at the moving photo of a bloke with dark hair, his arms wrapped around her waist.

That must’ve been what he looked like, Viktor Krum.

A gush of wind emerged from the open window. A shadow of a person blocked the moonlight but she hardly noticed, she was too lost in her forgotten thoughts. *How could she not remember?*

Then she felt a cold, sinking feeling in her chest, like her heart stopped beating, like it was *gone*. No, this was too frightening, too empty. She felt nothing and knew nothing. She clutched her chest, trying to draw breath. She wasn’t even *choking* but she couldn’t seem to breathe. She wanted it to stop. *It was so cold.*

Suddenly she was staring at the figure by the window pane.

Suddeny she couldn't believe her eyes.

"Found you."

Oh sweet Merlin.

The realization that her assumptions had in fact been correct horrified her. She was on her feet immediately, wand held tight in her hand in panic. She trembled as he removed the black hood draped over his head. His platinum blond was once again visible to her after all these years. It was longer, messier and it covered his eyes. He was still as handsome and intimidating as ever. He tilted his head sideways and sneered.

"You're not sleeping again."

His shades of grey were everything she remembered them to be: beautiful, *haunting*.

She actually froze for a couple of minutes, just staring at him with wide eyes.

"M-Malfoy," she said when she finally found the courage to speak. She was scared to be standing here, in the presence of a murderer. She couldn't apparate, she found out after trying. She backed a few steps towards the door. "You— this isn't— You're dead—"

He laughed coldly at her horrified expression, advancing towards her carefully as though he was approaching a frightened little rabbit close to running away. "Well I did promise I would come back for you, didn't I?"

Something pounded in her chest. She noticed she could feel her heart beat again.

She moved a few more steps away from him until her back collided with the door, turned its knob with her hand while still facing him, only to find that it was locked. She cursed under her breath. *Of course* he had the room warded, why would she expect anything less of him?

"But you've always known. You've known I would come back, haven't you love?" His eyes gleamed in enthusiasm. "Spent years and years trying to deny it too, even resorting to marrying someone so beneath you." His face twisted in disgust.

"One more step, Malfoy, and I swear I'll—"

"Of course I couldn't have you marrying some unworthy piece of shit." His voice was a harsh whisper. He turned his back on her and started surveying the room. He seemed to be looking for something. He eyed the photo of her and Viktor with obvious revulsion. "I had to do *something*."

She jumped when the photo suddenly burst into flames, burning into nothing but ash in a matter of seconds.

Her fear turned into anger at once. She might not have remembered anything about Viktor, but she knew at one point, she'd cared for him.

"So brave, you were." He was going through the get-well-soon cards and flowers in the table now, grabbing and throwing everything he could reach. He scrunched one card into a ball and threw it carelessly over his shoulder. "Or was it stupidity, Granger?"

He began walking to the dresser in long strides. Then he looked as if he finally found what he'd been looking for. Hermione watched as he took the engagement ring in his hand and

raised it in eye level, carefully examining it. “You were safe outside, you and Potter. But you just *had* to run and save Krum, didn’t you? You and your Gryffindor heroics. Adorable, really. *Very touching.*”

He threw the engagement ring in the air and caught it in his hand again.

“Hand it over, Draco,” she hissed angrily.

He turned his head to face her once again, then he smirked mockingly.

“I don’t think I should.”

Before she knew what was happening, his towering form was in front of her in a matter of seconds, so close she felt his cold breath touch her skin. She forced her mouth shut to stop herself from screaming, her fear returning once again.

She shivered uncontrollably, earning another arrogant smirk from him.

That strange coldness and emptiness flooded her once more, only this time it was more intense. She felt her chest constrict at the sudden loss of something.

A heart, perhaps?

“Do you feel that?” he said with a tone of amusement. He could feel it too? “Strange, isn’t it?”

She resisted the urge to ask.

His forehead touched hers and he was inches away from her face. She inhaled his addictive scent, almost letting it consume her and impair her senses. She forced her eyes shut to block him out but it didn’t help. He was just so close, it unnerved her.

“What? No welcome back kiss?” he purred in her ear softly. “No, ‘honey I’m so glad you’re home?’”

Her mind was foggy again. He was taunting her purposely, being sadistically sweet and making her feel breathless with his every touch.

Oh Merlin she had to get out of here.

“Well?” he said impatiently.

She tried to think straight but everything about him rendered her incapable of doing so. She struggled to regain her composure, calculating on ways to get herself out of the situation unharmed. *Get a grip, Hermione.* She took a deep breath. She knew what he wanted.

Her trembling hands cupped his cheeks and she pulled him closer...

...a kiss.

She brought his lips to hers, slowly giving him little, gentle kisses. He was pleased, she could tell, because he leaned closer, deepening the kiss. She meant for it to be a distraction. *Only a distraction.* But a sudden overwhelming feeling engulfed her at their contact.

She suddenly wanted more of him, to taste him, to *feel* him...

W-what?

Draco was hexed into oblivion seconds later. He rolled over the floor and groaned in pain. She hadn't realized she was breathing heavily until she heard herself. She usually had a rational, logical mind, but right now she just couldn't control what she was doing, she was so angry.

What possessed her to *throw herself* on top of him and *straddle* his stomach, Hermione will never know.

All she remembered was that she saw red and then she was above him, flogging every part of him she could reach.

"How dare you! You think you can just come here and seduce me after killing Viktor and erasing all my memories of him? You bastard! You sick fuck!" She tried to hit him again and again, but he held her hands tight to stop her. "I hate you! I hate you! You—Ugh!"

The bastard started to laugh.

"Stop it!" she yelled in outrage.

"Throwing your wand away and using muggle tactics to kill me—" he said while still laughing loudly, "—*honestly*—"

"This is all your— will you stop laughing?" she yelled again and she managed to hit his chest despite his hold on her hands. He was stronger than her, could easily push her off but he didn't. He just let her pound his chest. She was on the verge of crying in anger and he wouldn't even take her seriously. He wouldn't stop laughing. "Stop it! I don't give a damn what kind of tactics I—"

The door burst open, revealing a very shocked man outside. Hermione noticed Draco roll his eyes.

"M-Merlin's beard!" he said while taking in the rather unusual scenario in front of him. "D-Draco Malfoy!"

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Okay no more threats of discontinuing. I only did that in the first chapter to make sure you still wanted a sequel anyways. Review if you feel like it, it would make me really happy if you did :)

Chapter 3

Happy Holidays loves :)

This chapter is a bit overwhelming. Haha. Oh well. I'm trying to update sooner, but things get a little out of hand with christmas coming and everything...

Here we go then :)

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"I'm so sorry for your loss. Viktor was a great man, and a great Quidditch player too." said Samantha Dewhurst, her co-worker, while patting her shoulders.

Hermione merely nodded. It was her first day back to work as a researcher in the Department of Magical Research and Development but she didn't really feel like doing anything. She felt a pang in her heart everytime someone would come up to her and say, 'I'm so sorry for your loss,' 'Viktor was a great man' or 'Viktor was a great Quidditch player.'

She tried to feel something, really. but how could she when she didn't even remember him?

It was like one of those times, when you hear someone die in the news. You feel sad for a while, but forget about it eventually because that person wasn't really that close to you.

But they were close, sweet Merlin they were about to get married too...

She sighed.

She had a mixture of different emotions; specifically guilt for not feeling miserable enough, and anger at herself for letting Malfoy win again. She shoved her emotions out of the way and tried to busy herself with her books and experiments.

The laboratory was quiet when she started mixing up the ingredients. Everyone probably thought she needed some alone time and she was thankful for this. She needed to lose herself. She needed to relax or she would go mad. She sniffed the fumes of her potion and smelled the intoxicating scent of the mint herbs. She watched, satisfied, as the potion swirled and turned into a slimy green color.

"Hermione."

She turned and cringed slightly at the sight of blonde hair, accidentally adding a bit more of the pixie tears than necessary.

"Oh no." The potion turned shocking pink this time, the cauldron started shaking and shaking.

"DUCK!" she yelled.

The potion exploded with a deafening sound, splattering pink goo everywhere.

Bugger. Now she had to start all over again. She spat the liquid substance that got inside her mouth, stood up and pursed her lips at the pink mess.

“Harry told me to come check on you.” came Luna’s dreamy voice. Her clothes and hair were disheveled, covered in pink goo. Hermione chuckled at the sight. She walked over to Luna and hugged her tightly. “And to invite you to our house for dinner too.”

“When did you get back?” Hermione asked while grabbing her wand and cleaning Luna’s clothes.

Luna was a naturalist. She travelled the world looking for various mad creatures, similar to the Crumple-Horned Snorlacks and Umgubuglar Slashkitties or whatever she called them.

“Just yesterday.” She replied serenely. Hermione started cleaning the walls. “I just had a feeling you needed help, with Viktor gone and Draco Malfoy back and everything.”

Hermione stopped momentarily.

“Oh, so Harry told you?”

“That Draco Malfoy came back? Yes.” She took her wand that was stuck behind her ear and started helping Hermione clean the mess. “I suppose it was only a matter of time.”

Hermione fidgeted awkwardly. Talking to Luna always made her feel rather uneasy. She didn’t know what Luna was thinking half the time and she hardly understood what Luna was saying.

“What makes you say that?” said Hermione.

“A lot of things,” she smiled dreamily, “Draco Malfoy’s quite evil, but it gives me great comfort that unlike you-know-who, he knows how.”

Sometimes Hermione wonders what the world would look like through Luna Lovegood’s eyes. She was incredibly open-minded, and she saw things most people didn’t see, or didn’t want to see.

Maybe that’s why Harry fell in love with her.

“How? How to what?”

Luna stared at her although she looked like she wasn’t really seeing her. She stared and stared, her protuberant eyes never blinking even once. It really made her feel uncomfortable. “To love, of course.” She said nonchalantly, before looking away. “He’s just got a different way of showing it.”

Hermione stared at the floor in embarrassment. “I—er—”

Luna carefully held a lock of long hair in her hand, examining it dreamily. Her blonde tresses were now highlighted with streaks of pink.

Hermione moved towards her to get the pink goo out of her hair. “Here, let me.”

“Oh no,” Luna told her, “I kinda like it. Besides, my hair bothers you, doesn’t it? It’s blonde like Draco’s, yes?”

Hermione managed to nod stiffly. She watched, dumbfounded, as Luna started heading to the door, pink highlights and all. She stopped for a while.

“I knew he would come back, because the things we lose have a way of coming back to us in the end.”

She smiled a dreamy smile again, then she was gone.

The room was dimly lit; it was more of a dungeon than a room actually. It might even be underground, because there were no windows, merely torches very much like the ones that illuminated the walls of Hogwarts. There were rows and rows of witches and wizards that were seated around every wall on what seemed to be benches rising in levels, all positioned so that they had a very clear view of a chair in the center. The chair had chains on its arms.

Hermione was sitting at the very corner of the dungeon, hidden in the shadows. She stayed there specifically so she wouldn’t be seen by the person who was about to sit in the center chair. She wasn’t allowed here, but somehow she convinced Harry to let her come, as long as Malfoy didn’t see her.

She could see from the top of everyone’s hats. They were all patiently waiting for him, and none of them were talking to one another.

She heard footsteps. The door in the corner of the dungeon opened and five people entered — or at least one man and four dementors. As if it wasn’t already cold enough, the dementors seemed to make the dungeon colder.

She fidgeted in her seat nervously at the sight of him, only relaxing when Harry touched her shoulder.

“It’s okay.”

Somehow those words sounded familiar.

Harry stood from his seat beside her and occupied the empty seat close to the center chair. He wanted to see Malfoy’s reaction to all of this. Malfoy sat lazily; he didn’t acknowledge Harry’s presence. His hands were sprawled in the arms of the chair, his legs were crossed and he looked very much like he didn’t have a care in the world—like he wasn’t about to be sent to Azkaban or he wasn’t surrounded by four soul-sucking monsters.

She wondered how he did it, how he was so calm everytime a situation like this happens. She thought of different reasons; maybe he wasn’t really calm, maybe he was just good at hiding his nerves... then again maybe he didn’t really feel anything at all.

“Draco Malfoy,” said the deep voice of Mr. Alasdair Worden, he was wearing a black hat and dark robes, “you have been brought here by the Council of Magical Law so that we may pass judgement on you for a crime so heinous—” She saw Draco raise an eyebrow “—that we have rarely heard the like of it within this court.

“We have heard the evidence against you. You stand accused of torturing and killing Ronald Bilius Weasley by the use of Moonseed poison,” gasps and murmurs erupted from the crowd. He paused as if he was waiting for Malfoy to protest. When Draco didn’t do

anything he continued, “You were found in possession of the Luteus stone and you were also behind the murders in the Winter Masquerade in Hogwarts five years ago.”

“...sweet Merlin, Moonseed? That’s impossible to make, that is...”

“...it hasn’t been brewed over hundreds of years...”

“...Luteus stone! Is it still inside...”

“...and what poison did he use in the Massacre? I heard they couldn’t find a cure...”

“...no cure at all. It destroyed Minerva, having to watch those students die a slow, painful death...”

“...of course it would be nothing short of brilliant, this is Draco Malfoy...”

Draco remained impassive. His handsome face was expressionless but he had a calculating look in his eyes. Hermione felt a cold, sinking feeling in her chest again. Perhaps it was because of the dementors.

“Do you have anything to add to your testimony before we pass judgement?”

Draco’s lips slowly curled into a smirk.

“These evidences,” he said tauntingly, “what are they, exactly?”

“I beg your pardon?” said Worden, slightly confused by his question.

“Kindly elaborate — the evidences you have—against me.” Draco said slowly, as if he was talking to a child.

“Oh yes, well,” Worden cleared his throat. He placed spectacles in his eyes and unrolled a piece of parchment. He began to read. ‘The brewing process of Menispernum (commonly known as Moonseed) is incredibly difficult, containing 727 steps over a seven month maturation period. Because of this, Menispernum is rarely used and fairly unknown to most wizards and witches, and is only known to a few pureblood families.’ He looked up from the parchment. “The Malfoy family is one of the old pureblood families capable of brewing Moonseed. They practice the art of poison-making. Impossible as it may sound, you have the skills to do so.”

Draco’s smirk widened but he didn’t say anything. Hermione was infuriated with the way he was behaving. He was too calm and collected. He was up to something.

“Yes Mr. Malfoy?” Worden looked slightly irritated. Apparently, he noticed Draco’s behavior too. “Do you have anything to say?”

“It just seems like you based your accusations on weak evidences.” He replied in a casual yet arrogant tone.

The noise from the crowd grew louder. Mr. Worden’s face twisted into pure dislike. He stared at Draco with deep annoyance.

“Weak evidences?”

“Do you have any proof at all that he was poisoned?” Suddenly it dawned on Hermione what he was going to do, he was going to manipulate everyone into thinking he was innocent.

The sodding git.

Let him try then. He can't possibly worm his way out if this one, can he?

“Nothing?” Draco paused and waited for Worden to answer. When Worden didn’t speak, he leaned back on his chair and clicked his tongue. “I’m disappointed.”

She desperately wanted to wipe that smirk off his face.

“From what I heard, Madam Pomfrey gave him medicine that contained centaur blood. Now there have been cases—rare occurrences, mind you—where wizards and witches die of having to take such a medicine. Weasley’s blood is not compatible with the centaur’s blood and therefore his body rejected it.”

“Hermione said she saw the roses that killed Ron turn black before withering.” Harry said loudly. “Care to explain that one?”

This time, Malfoy finally acknowledged Harry. “Ah yes, Hermione. Can she prove it?”

Malfoy stood from the chair and started pacing around the dungeon, eyeing everyone he passed. “Even if Weasley was poisoned, which I doubt very much, there isn’t any proof that it was me who did it, is there? I do have motive, yes, but there is still no concrete evidence putting me in the crime scene.” He snorted a short laugh. “Hell, I didn’t even give him the roses—”

“Your team hit him with the bludger that sent him to the Hospital Wing!” Harry said loudly.

“An honest mistake.” He replied. “It’s Quidditch, Potter. People get hurt. My team did send him to the Hospital Wing, but that’s all. As far as I know, that doesn’t amount to murder.”

“The Luteus Stone was found inside of you—”

“I thought we already established that I only placed it inside of me because I was forced by Voldemort?”

“What? WHAT? You played Voldemort! You did it to gain more power!”

“Believe what you want Potter, but remember, Dumbledore himself said I was innocent.”

He thought about everything. Hermione was about to stand and give him a piece of her mind but Harry beat her to it, he stood from his chair in anger.

“And what about the people in the Winter Masquerade Massacre?” Harry was shouting now. “I suppose you think they just dropped dead of their own accord?”

“Again, there is no real evidence against me.” He stopped walking directly at the place where Hermione was hidden for a while. This can’t be happening. He was winning. He was manipulating people into his side again. She tried to stand and hex his sorry arse but the person to her right glared at her and reminded her that she mustn’t be seen. Draco continued walking. “Aside from the fact that I know how to brew such poisons.”

There was a long silence.

Draco finally stopped walking and settled in the center chair again.

“Mr. Potter believes you committed these crimes. He claims you—confessed—that night in the Astronomy Tower.” said Worden.

“Coming from someone who accused the Zabinis of being Death Eaters *out of spite*.” Draco sneered at Harry. “Let’s all take the Chosen One’s word for it!”

Harry looked furious, his knuckles were white in anger. Hermione thought he was going to grab his wand but he sat in his chair again, confirming to everyone what Malfoy had just said.

“What about the Krums?” said a wizard said from the upper left bench. “The Krum Mansion burned to crisp and you suddenly come back from the dead, isn’t that a little suspicious?”

“Yes it is,” Draco said loudly, more menacing than ever. He seemed irritated at the mention of the name, “but we already know how the *Krums* died, don’t we?”

More gasps came from the crowd. *What is he playing at?*

“Mr. Malfoy,” Worden said in a surprised tone. “Is this... Are you confessing?”

Draco suddenly had a very evil gleam on his eyes. She didn’t like it at all.

“Well no, I didn’t do anything,” he smirked once more. His expression was almost feral, “Viktor Krum shouldn’t have stolen what was *mine*.”

Hermione felt her heart race. She felt a mixture of hatred and anger. She saw Harry staring at her with utter confusion on his face. She stared back, trying to tell him she was just as confused as he was. The titters from the crowd were deafening.

“Mr. Malfoy?”

“The Krums died because of this.” He threw a small object at Worden and he caught it. He raised it at eye level.

“A ring?”

Suddenly no one was talking anymore. Harry looked dumbfounded. Hermione suddenly felt the need to get out of there.

“Hermione Granger’s engagement ring, to be more precise,” Draco said with a sadistically happy smile.

“If you’re going to blame this on Hermione—”

“Relax Potter.”

And at that very moment, Hermione knew the world had ended. She braced herself.

She didn’t know how (he wasn’t suppose to know she was there), but right now Draco’s look was directed precisely towards her.

“It wasn’t her fault, really.” He continued, still staring at her intensely. He stood up again. “She didn’t know I was still alive, so she thought...” He placed his hands on his pockets. “... it’s okay to get married again.”

The crowd went wild, voices of protest and shock resounded everywhere. She could hear a great deal of them from where she was sitting. A couple of people were already eyeing her in shock.

“...A mudblood married to a Malfoy, unacceptable...”

Hermione was literally frozen in her seat. She felt at a loss of words, of anything. Her heart wouldn’t stop pounding.

“...This is obviously a lie isn’t it? Hermione would never...”

“...Poor thing, she probably didn’t know about the pureblood tradition...”

“Is—is this true, Ms. Granger?” Worden’s voice was the only thing that made sense, the only thing that was clear amongst the whispers. It reeked of disbelief, denial.

“I—I—” She tried to grasp the right words but her mind went blank. *What else could she say?* The truth was already out.

“Go on, princess.” Draco said in mock encouragement. “Tell them how we bonded. Show them my family crest.”

“...a traditional marriage bond? That explains the Fiendfyre...”

“...I can’t believe this. The Malfoy name has been stained...”

“...and the memory loss too...”

“*Tell them you belong to me.*”

Someone was grabbing her and pulling her to the center space. She didn’t know who exactly. It was all a blur of confusion, the smear of colors of different faces blending before her eyes. She usually knew what to do or what to say, but right now she just felt lost.

Grey.

She remembered this feeling. She could never forget.

When the whole world held its breath...

She felt his gentle touch in her skin, felt herself shiver. He took her wand and aimed it at her arm. The crest she tried to hide after all these years was now as clear as ever.

He stared at her once more before giving her back her wand and letting go of her arm.

“The moment she wore the ring, the bond obviously noticed the betrayal.” He told everyone in a serious tone. ‘What magic has bound together, no man can undo. And if any man should try to undo the magic, he, along with his family, will burn to death. I’m sure you know this.’ He stared at the purebloods and they nodded. “She can’t remember him because of the bond too. Betrayal is a grave offence in a marriage bond. I came back to tell her, and to warn the Krums, but obviously, I was too late.”

“You’re LYING!” She yelled, suddenly feeling her blood boil. “You did this on purpose! You WANTED them dead!”

“Such ludicrous charges.” He gazed back at her, smirking again.

“Don’t you see what he’s trying to do?” Hermione yelled at the crowd. “He’s trying to manipulate you into believing him! He’s—he’s *brainwashing* you!”

“Now, now, Hermione.” He said mockingly. “I’m merely trying to prove my innocence.”

“Innocence?” Harry shouted. “You wouldn’t know the meaning of the word—”

“STOP IT! THE THREE OF YOU!” Mr. Worden yelled. They all looked at him and kept quiet. He adjusted his spectacles and took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves.

It took a while before he composed himself and recovered from the shock.

“I now ask the jury,” he said, his voice slightly shaking, “to raise their hands if they believe that these crimes deserve a life sentence in Azkaban.”

A great number of hands were thrown in the air but Hermione shook her head.

It wasn’t enough.

He won again.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Well they didn’t have enough evidence to send him to Azkaban in the first place. He was too thorough with hiding his crimes. Aww... :(

My longest chapter so far :p Read and Review!

Care to answer my poll? :)

Chapter 4

Thanks to those who reviewed the last chapter! Cookies for you!

You guys wanted to know why Draco turned so evil, yeah? And when he fell in love with Hermione?

I took lines from HBHE, to explain further.

Feel free to point out any errors, I don't have time to edit properly today. I have exams tomorrow haha.

It's so depressing, this chapter :/ but that's how it's supposed to be, I guess.

Anyways, here it is

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

FLASHBACK CHAPTER

He walked swiftly through the halls of the castle, his dark robes billowing around him.

He didn't care for a moment where his feet would take him, as long as he got somewhere, as long as he was alone.

Angrily, he shoved a 4th year out of his way that had been blocking his path. Another that had seen him coming jumped out of his way. The students stared at him as he went. He glared at every single one of them.

To think, he was finally able to come home and have a relaxing break at the Manor. Imagine his surprise when Draco suddenly had found *him*, of all people, awaiting his presence. Apparently, his parents had just happened to feel like inviting the man over for dinner.

The Dark Lord for a Christmas present. Oh joy.

He stared coldly at the group of giggling girls trailing after him. In effect, they only giggled harder (if that was even possible), making him want to pull all his hair out and curse them all to death.

"He's in one of his moods again," he heard a couple of people whisper as he passed. He would probably have killed anyone that dared cross his path at that moment. They ought know not to bother him when he was angry.

The next thing he knew he was trudging past rows of shelves. The smell of old books was almost unbearable, but it was quiet here and to his relief, Madam Pince wouldn't allow his blasted 'fan girls' inside due to their constant giggling. So really, he could care less about the disgusting smell.

He felt his legs slowly collapsing, felt his body slipping to the ground. Soon he was seated, one leg stretched carelessly on the floor and the other one bended. He banged his head against the shelf several times to forget the images that kept replaying in his mind, but to no avail.

He couldn't forget... Tall, thin and black-hooded, his terrible snake-like face white and gaunt, his scarlet, slit-pupiled eyes staring.

He had tortured a few mudbloods while Draco was forced to watch, unable to look away. Draco could still hear their desperate screams in his ears, could still smell the stench of their dirty blood. The Dark Lord hadn't killed them until they were so broken, so hurt, that they begged for it — for death — anything to relieve them of the pain.

He could still remember the way his skin had crawled as he somehow managed to stare back at those pitiless red eyes. The eyes of a monster.

“He wanted to make me his heir, Granger, and he didn’t want Dumbledore to know. He wanted Dumbledore to believe I was just a pawn.”

“Ow!” Someone tripped and landed across his legs with a loud thud, snapping him out of his thoughts. “What the fuck!”

The books she was carrying were scattered everywhere. Her bushy brown locks were spread all over the floor. She cursed under her breath and tried to stand with her palms flat on the ground but since she was on top of his legs, Draco kneed her hard on the stomach, causing her to fall down again.

“Malfoy!” She groaned in pain.

“You can hardly blame me for putting you in your place, can you mudblood?” he answered lazily, staring at her as she clutched her stomach. “People like you belong on the floor.”

Flashes of the screaming people writhing on the cellar floor appeared in his mind again. He rubbed his forehead roughly.

“Is that why you’re here too, then?” he heard her say in an angry tone. She tried to get up again and this time, he didn’t stop her. She sat beside him and winced, holding her right ankle gently. “Now look what you’ve done.” She winced again.

“I suppose you want me to help you now?”

Granger looked like she wasn’t paying attention. Her eyes were focused on her right ankle instead. She was examining it for damage, poking it gently with her hand. She didn’t even notice that Draco could see under her skirt.

“Nice view.”

She looked at him in confusion, then she covered herself at once and glared at him. He merely raised an eyebrow.

“Your wand’s over there, you know.” He didn’t bother to help her get it, though it was only a few feet away from him. He fought to stay as composed as possible, his cold front threatening to break down. The disturbing images keep flashing in his mind.

“Alright, alright,” she said. Her hand grabbed a shelf and with all her strength she lifted herself up. Again, she winced, bit her lower lip in pain. Draco watched in a daze as she limped to her wand carefully. After what felt like forever, she finally reached it, and the books levitated seconds later. She turned to leave.

“What?” she asked in annoyance, her face twisted into a sort of expression that showed she regretted asking.

“Just go away, will you? I’m not in the mood.” He tried to sound indifferent, but his voice cracked.

“You’re sulking.”

“I am not!” he groaned and looked away.

“Yes, you are,” she said, as a matter-of-fact. Her silly know-it-all demeanor irked him once again. “I could have slapped you, you know, for tripping me. If it wasn’t for the fact that you’re so... gloomy.” She frowned at him.

“You know what, do what you want.” He banged his head on the bookshelf again and looked at the ceiling, determined to ignore her. “I don’t fucking care.”

She sighed deeply.

He heard her start to limp away again. *Yeah, that’s right mudblood, keep limping.*

“If it’s about your girlfriend, I can help,” said her irritating voice once more.

He rolled his eyes at the thought of talking to Granger about relationship problems. He knew what she was trying to do. She was trying to get him to talk, (Merlin knew why) and she wasn’t going to go away. She wasn’t going to make this easy for him and just leave.

“I sure wish it was that simple,” he answered her tiredly, eyes still focused on the ceiling.

“Oh, so it’s about your parents?”

He shrugged.

“V-Voldemort then?”

He winced at how bravely she’d said his name. His face darkened a little. “Look, it’s none of your business,” he retorted coldly. “Are you done interrogating me?”

She didn’t answer, merely stared at him with such intensity, almost as if she was trying to search for something in his eyes... something... he had no idea what.

For a long time they didn’t speak. But even so he could still feel her eyes lingering on him.

She was always giving him knowing looks these days. Dumbledore had the same look. It was unnerving. *What was their problem?*

“Fine, keep sulking then,” she said haughtily. She started limping away again. “I was only trying to help.”

Only trying to help? He doubted it. He balled his fists in anger.

What did she know? She wasn’t the one being forced to continue the *legacy* of the Dark Lord here. She wasn’t the one who had his paths laid out for him, without being given the opportunity to choose or to say no. She wasn’t the one being forced to acknowledge someone else’s beliefs, while at the same time, forced to ignore his own.

She didn’t know *anything*.

He suddenly found himself standing up in anger and slamming her to the bookshelf before he could stop himself. She almost screamed but he covered her mouth with his hand just in time.

The levitating books fell down again.

He hated her, how she was so sure that she could easily help him with all this mess, as if everything was so fucking *simple*.

Everybody thought it was simple. They kept telling him he should just be honored and happy about it, that he should be grateful that the Dark Lord chose him above everyone else. The voices and the mixed screams he kept hearing in his head were driving him mad.

He didn’t want any of it. He didn’t want to be a fucking heir. And yes, he was scared. *To hell with pride.* He was so fucking scared.

But he mustn’t let them know.

“I don’t need your help!” he huffed loudly, making her jump.

He was this close to taking his anger out on her or strangling her to death. She must’ve felt it with the way his body was pressed hard against hers, preventing any means of escape, or the way his voice sounded more menacing, more murderous than ever, or the way he was crushing her small wrists brutally in his hands.

She almost looked scared, *almost*, he even felt her shiver but the determination in her eyes was far more evident.

There was something about the way she was looking at him, as if she somehow knew he wasn’t really going to hurt her.

“But I do, too.” Her voice was soft and mild, and he found himself relaxing at the sound.

“What?” he whispered faintly.

“Believe in you.”

“Stop staring at me like—like *that*!” He had nearly forgotten where he was and almost shouted in her face.

He felt a growing need to hurt her, to gouge her eyes out and make sure she never looked at him that way again. She shut her eyes tight when he raised his fist. He wanted to hit her, he really did.

Go on, Draco. Hit her.

She was nothing but a mudblood. She deserved to suffer. She deserved all the pain. Just like all those mudbloods now disposed of deserved such morbid deaths. *Don't be a coward Draco. Hit her...*

For a moment, he imagined it was Granger who was tortured and mutilated mercilessly in front of him, that it was Granger who staring back at him instead of those nameless faces.

Then he wondered if she would scream.

And if she did, *would he even want to hear it?*

His fist trembled. He could feel his heart pounding wildly in his chest. He had every chance to hit her, to break her face and destroy her determination, to show her she was nothing... nothing but filth. Just like how the Dark Lord had shown them. His mind was screaming at him to do it.

He had every chance.

“You’re still there somewhere! I know you are!”

The truth, it came crashing down on him like a bucket of cold water, drenching his every being, shaking him to the core.

He couldn’t hit her.

He couldn’t.

He wasn’t strong enough... wasn’t *heartless* enough.

His father would have been ashamed of him, the Dark Lord would have laughed at his weakness.

Unconsciously, he leaned his head on top of hers.

Why did he feel so relieved, then? Why did he feel like a weight had been lifted off his chest?

“It’s alright,” he heard her say in a strangely soothing voice. She wrapped her arms around him without hesitation, shocking him, as if they were close, as if they were *friends*... and Draco suddenly felt the comfort he’d been craving for a long time. “You’re alright.”

Her words made him want to believe her. She managed to calm him down with her embrace. It was confusing, to suddenly find an ounce of solace in the most unlikely person. She was just so warm.

He didn't want to let go of this warmth.

“Say it again.”

“Draco?” He looked at her again, touched her cheeks to make sure she was real. *Her*, his source of warmth.

Then all of it was a blur. He remembered lifting her to his shoulder like she was a sack of potatoes, his arm wrapped around her thighs to keep her steady. He remembered ignoring her as she pounded at his back and kicked his chest and how she kept struggling and screaming like some mad person, ready to bite his head off. He remembered the murderous glares of his ‘fan girls’ as he left the Library with her on his shoulder. He remembered tossing her to the bed of the Hospital Wing and healing her ankle himself when he couldn’t find Madam Pomfrey anywhere.

“I—Thank you,” she said quietly, a small blush creeping in her cheeks.

“Good to know someone like you has manners,” he managed to say sardonically and he started heading to the door, muttering something that sounded like, *‘If I catch a mudblood this vulnerable again, I’ll be sure to take advantage.’*

And he remembered her smile too, how terribly sweet it was.

“*What happened to you?*” Her voice cracked again. Her face was sad and miserable. “*You weren’t always this empty, this cold.*”

“I was always like this, don’t tell me I’m any different.”

“You think this pathetic attempt at the Cruciatius Curse could hurt me, boy?” his high, cold voice bellowed, bouncing off the dungeon walls. “You’re not even trying! You need to *mean* it, Draco... You need to really want to cause pain—to enjoy it—this hesitation of yours is affecting your casting and it won’t hurt me for long. I shall teach you how it’s done. *Crucio.*”

Then there was pain... so much of it, it wouldn’t stop. It devoured him whole. He felt like his organs were being twisted and he was burning... *slowly and painfully...* it was biting and stinging his skin and it just wouldn’t go away.

“You’re still foolishly clouded by your emotions. We shall do something about that, shall we? To make sure you do not fail me.” He circled his limp, writhing form. The way he moved around him, it was almost like he was floating. Draco didn’t know. He wouldn’t lift the curse off. “When you lose all your emotions, then you will finally be worthy.”

Draco didn’t want to be worthy at all. But he had to hold onto his heart and survive this. He had to.

To feel her warmth again.

“You should thank your parents Draco. After all they *willingly* offered you to me.”

Draco managed to spit on the ground to show his disgust. Voldemort laughed humorlessly.

“Everyone thought so. Even my own parents thought I was a monster. Me, their own son.”

Days passed by, maybe weeks, or months, he wasn’t so sure. There was barely any light in the dungeons. His throat was sore from all the screaming. He couldn’t move anymore, too exhausted to even try. His mind was devoid of all thoughts, but he fought hard to stay conscious, to focus on anything but the burning ache.

Soon Draco killed like he did, tortured like he did. He was forced to do it *again and again*, until it was imprinted in his very being, until he was sure the blood of those he murdered couldn’t be washed off.

In time, Draco Malfoy learned to kill willingly on his own.

Soon he couldn’t feel anything anymore. Soon he was numb.

The pain faded, along with everything else...

“The only real purpose of it all was to have you...”

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Aww.

Next chapter will be less depressing, I promise :)

Last chance to vote on my poll! Vote wisely! It’ll affect the length of the whole story, not just the chapters :p

Review if you feel like it :) Thank you loves :D

Chapter 5

My poll results are out! Thanks to the people who voted, plus thanks to those people who reviewed chapter 4. *offers mushroom-flavored pie.*

Thanks to murtagh799 who beta-ed this chapter. My first ever beta! Drop by her page if you have the time :D Now I'm confident that this chapter won't have grammatical errors.

This chapter is 13 pages long :D Hoozah!

After the flashback chapter, we'll move on with the story.

Here it goes...

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"Will you please come out of there?"

She heard a small tap on her bedroom door. It was already Ginny's seventh or so visit to her flat this week. They'd been trying to get her to come out, not that it really mattered.

Hermione still wouldn't answer.

There was still so much to think about, so much to plan. She had to prepare herself as much as she could for the worst to come.

Her eyes darted to the pile of newspapers sprawled messily on her bed. There was a moving picture of a good-looking man with silver hair and a sneer on his face as the cameras flashed around him, the bold words indicating the events that happened during the past few weeks.

Draco Malfoy, Back From the Dead.

"Harry, do something!" She heard Ginny say in desperation.

Hermione went to the bathroom and splashed water on her face, its coldness making her wince. She stared at her red, tear-swollen eyes and heaved a sigh.

She had thought that she had finally been rid of him when her Healer had found him in her Hospital room that night. She had been relieved and so sure he would spend the rest of his demented life in Azkaban.

How could she have been so wrong?

Draco Malfoy Pleads not Guilty.

It wasn't fair, how he always got his way. She grudgingly admitted that he was too cunning and clever for his own good. It made her wonder if they even stood a chance against him.

They had gravely underestimated him, focusing only on the fact that he had the Luteus stone in his possession. They didn't even consider what he could do without it.

There was also a nagging thought inside her head, telling her that maybe the Stone was only a distraction, to distract them from what he could really do. Besides, it's no wonder Voldemort so readily chose him as his heir.

Draco Malfoy, Innocent, Released From Azkaban Prison.

She remembered how the Krum Mansion burned to a crisp, how the people ran wild while the fire engulfed them whole, but they were nothing but faceless strangers to her, a blur in her memory.

They were like missing puzzle pieces.

Yet for some reason, she was sure that Draco had been at her engagement party. Hermione knew he had done it on purpose. He had never intended to warn them about the fire, he had just come to watch the Krums burn to death.

And she still recalled his disturbingly *happy* expression as he told everyone how the Krums had died. Not even one of them had noticed that his voice held no remorse, no sympathy.

She hadn't known there was a punishment for betraying the bond, she hadn't known if Malfoy had been alive, and she certainly hadn't known that the bond would take innocent lives.

She hated not knowing.

She should've done something, but she hadn't. She should've researched about the bond rather than just trying hard to forget all about it.

But she hadn't. In the end, the Krums had died *because of her*. Just like how Ron had. She fought to keep the tears from falling once more. It was all her fault.

“Please Hermione, they need you! We need you!” Harry shouted. “They said you had to finish the Denovorum.”

“Go away,” She shouted weakly, wiping her face roughly with her hands. Merlin, even her voice sounded pathetic.

“They said it’s urgent!” Harry tried again. “They said those poor blokes who got sick would lose their magic and die if you don’t help them! You know how it’s been!”

For a moment, she was tempted to grab the knob, her heart sinking at the thought of all those sick people, but she hesitated.

“Perhaps she’s held captive by the Caballusi fairies?” came Luna’s dreamy voice. “Horse-like creatures. They’re known to swarm during this time of year.”

“Er—Do you know how to get rid of the Callasubi Fairies then, dear?” Harry muttered. Ginny groaned in annoyance and knocked on the door once more.

“Caballusi,” Luna corrected him, there was a happy tone in her voice. “Simple. You just have to make a lot of noise and shout.”

“HERMIONE GRANGER!” Ginny’s voice roared loudly. She almost sounded like Molly, and she wouldn’t stop banging the door. Hermione swore she saw the white walls of her bedroom shake. “IF YOU DON’T GET OUT HERE, SO HELP ME GODRIC, I WILL BREAK DOWN THIS DOOR!”

Cursing furiously, Hermione finally turned the knob.

As soon as the door opened, she was suffocated into a tight, almost brutal hug by a pair of arms. Immediately, she felt their warmth surround her, making her forget her worries temporarily. Home. Oh Merlin, she needed this. She couldn’t help but smile.

Luna dreamily skipped towards them and joined in too.

“I told you it would work,” she told Harry serenely.

“I never doubted you,” said Harry, grinning. Then he glared at Hermione. “Don’t ever scare us like that again.”

“I can’t—breathe,” Hermione managed to say, despite their vice-like grip on her.

“You prat,” said Ginny. “You bloody well deserve it! Moping and sulking in here for weeks. You should know better!”

“I haven’t been—sulking!” she defended, which was obviously a lie. “I was—planning revenge!”

“Without us?” said Ginny while letting out a soft chuckle. “How rude.”

After a couple of minutes, they finally let go of her and she breathed a sigh of relief. They stared at her exhausted form with worried expressions.

“You look horrible,” said Ginny with a small frown.

“Gee, thanks,” she replied sourly.

“It’s the Caballusi. They give off quite a depressing atmosphere,” Luna said dreamily, as she surveyed the room.

“You haven’t been eating, have you?” Harry accused. “Merlin, you haven’t even slept at all!”

“I—I was thinking,” was the only excuse she could come up with.

“Well enough of this—this—thinking,” Ginny waved her hand at her exhausted form in disapproval. “I’m going to make dinner. And you better eat everything on your plate or I’ll bloody pound you.”

“I wasn’t lying about the Denovorum potion, by the way,” Harry told her. “Padma told me to tell you.”

“Alright,” Hermione nodded in understanding. “Alright, I’ll go to work tomorrow.”

“Not until you get some rest you won’t!” Ginny said fiercely. Harry nodded in agreement.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Harry, “I already talked to Worden. He’s not going to tell the public about your—” his face twisted in irritation, “—marriage to Malfoy. Strangely enough,

Malfoy told him the same thing as well.”

“He did?” Both Hermione and Ginny said in unison.

“I know,” Harry furrowed his eyebrows. “One minute he’s ranting about it to everyone’s faces, next he tells everybody to shut up about it. Luna honey, what are you doing?”

They all looked at the blonde-haired girl with pink highlights, the tip of her wand glowing with a pale, blue light as she waved it around the place.

“Removing the bad atmosphere,” she replied serenely, not sparing them another glance.

“Do you reckon he’s finally had it with Hermione now that the purebloods know?” Ginny asked, hopeful. “I mean, he is still a prejudiced git, isn’t he?”

“Not bloody likely,” Harry replied, while looking at the pile of newspapers on Hermione’s bed and frowning. “Knowing Malfoy, he’s definitely up to something. Listen, he’s going to try to get you. It’s only a matter of time.”

Hermione felt fear rush over her at his words. “*Get me?*” she gulped.

“To live with him, in the Malfoy Manor,” Harry said sadly. “He thinks it’s only right because you’re *married*. Good news is, he can’t make you live with him without being granted permission by the Ministry. I made sure too. I already talked to the Order to sort things out. We’re not going to let him have his way. Shacklebolt’s been very helpful, but we need more proof. It’s going to take a lot before we can properly arrest him.”

“So what happens now?” she asked. “We just pretend like nothing happened? We just watch while he runs free?”

“I’m doing the best I can!” Harry said, frustrated.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean—” She buried her face in her hands and groaned. “It’s just been hard.”

“Forget about it,” Harry said in understanding.

“No I shouldn’t have—”

“I said forget it. It doesn’t matter.”

“He can’t get to you, alright?” said Ginny, while patting her back. “We won’t let him.”

When she got to work the next day (with newly found confidence and strength thanks to Harry, Ginny and Luna), she decided to proceed to the laboratory immediately, instead of heading directly to her office. She wanted to finish the Denovorum, then maybe pass by the library to research some more about marriage bonds.

As soon as she entered, she saw a group of people gathered around someone, a girl seated on the table. Her strong features were striking, with dark eyes, voluptuous lips, chiselled cheekbones and a defined jaw line. She looked like one of those girls in the fashion magazines. The crowd was listening attentively to her every word, all eyes were on her.

Hermione tiptoed as quietly as she could, so as not to be noticed, but apparently she wasn't quiet enough. The girl turned her head to her direction and smiled. Hermione groaned inwardly.

"Hermione," she said in a *perfect* high pitched voice that sounded much too enthusiastic for Hermione's liking.

"Astoria," Hermione replied dryly. "Back from Russia already?"

"Yes, just yesterday. I was just telling this lot about my astonishing discovery of the *Vinewhip bushes* in the Romincka Forest." She held up a leaf to prove her point. "It's very rare and valuable, very hard to find. Care to join us?"

Vinewhip bushes were, of course, rare bushes that had a lot of use in potion-making. Hermione resisted the urge to take a look. The girl was obviously trying to brag about it again, it was clear by the arrogant tone in her voice.

"No thanks, I have to finish the Denovorum potion," Hermione answered, forgetting that it would annoy Astoria Greengrass extremely. Hermione was the only person in the building (the only person in the entire Britain for that matter) capable of making such a complicated potion and Astoria didn't like the idea.

She always wanted to best Hermione at *everything*.

Sure enough, Hermione watched, as Astoria's gorgeous face resembled an ugly mandrake within seconds.

"Oh, but you must!" she insisted. Her eyes flashed in irritation as she stood from the table and walked towards her. "Besides, you have yet to tell me how your engagement party went."

The whole room fell silent.

By her facial expression, it was clear that Greengrass already knew about the incident but the irritating cow pretended she didn't, just to spite Hermione. Astoria probably abhorred the idea of Hermione marrying a famous, rich, international Quidditch player, and now that Viktor was gone, she was going to rub it in.

"Didn't anyone tell you?" Robert said from Astoria's right. He whispered something in her ear. Astoria's face twisted into an obviously fake shocked expression.

"Oh no, I'm so sorry." She pretended to be sympathetic, but it only sounded like she was more than happy about it.

Cow.

Hermione's cheeks flushed red in anger, but before she had a chance to retort, Astoria was surrounded by her admirers once more.

"It almost seems like Viktor Krum would rather die than be married to someone like her," her perfect high pitched voice resounded. Her admirers roared in laughter.

Furious, Hermione raced to the other part of the laboratory without a backward glance and slammed the door shut.

Just calm down Hermione, she kept repeating in a sort of inane chant. “I’m going to get her back for this.”

She took a mortar and pestle and crushed a nut seed with so much force it was a fine, powdery substance by the time she was through with it. She had imagined it was Astoria’s head the whole time.

The cauldron full of black liquid substance was still swirling and bubbling even though she had stored it in the cupboards about a week ago. Its continuous movement was fascinating, like a whirlpool of endless, magical flow. She worked on it for an hour, adding ingredients carefully, until the liquid substance finally hardened into a metallic form. She smiled in satisfaction. 500 more steps and the potion would be complete.

“Hermione! There you are!”

Padma burst into the lab immediately, looking more stressed and exhausted than ever, her usually plaited hair a mess. She paused a few seconds to catch her breath. “Where were you! I’ve been looking everywhere! What are you doing? Why aren’t you dressed?”

She started to mutter to herself and stare at her watch in panic.

“What’s wrong with my robes?” Hermione looked at her robes, confused. She wore robes like these for work all the time. Padma groaned and grabbed her shoulders, shaking her roughly.

“You have a meeting in 30 MINUTES!” She all but yelled.

“I—what?”

“I thought Harry told you! Oh Hermione,” Padma grabbed her hand and dragged her back to her office. “Somebody offered to fund your project! You have to get dressed. NOW!”

Without being given much choice, Hermione was dressed 15 minutes later, in record time.

The robes she wore looked more presentable and formal. Her hair was tied into a messy bun, with loose curls framing her face.

“Now remember, you have to show him that this project will be worth it. Astoria’s in there too—”

“But Padma, I’m not—”

“—eat you alive if you’re not careful. She’s going to try to steal him from you—”

“I’m not prepared at all—”

“Nonsense! Do your best and you’ll be fine. Go!”

With a slight shove, Hermione was forced to enter the black double doors of the conference hall. Once inside, she realized that there were already people seated around a table, talking vigorously with one another.

“Finally,” drawled Madam Dumass, her boss, as she noticed Hermione walk in. “You made it.”

But Hermione wasn’t looking at Madam Dumass at all; instead her eyes were focused on the very handsome bloke sitting beside her boss, holding a mug of coffee in his hands. Her heart leapt in her chest.

There he was, in all his glory, clad in a black suit that was simply marvellous on him. His silver blonde hair was still in disarray, complimenting his rather sharp, pointed features. He was absolutely stunning. His arms were sprawled in the arm rest, and once again he looked like he didn’t have a care in the world.

He looked up at her and smirked.

“Why the bloody hell are you here?” Hermione yelled out before she could stop herself.

“Ms. Granger!” Madam Dumass scolded, outraged at her sudden rude behaviour. “I would think you would show a little more respect to your sponsor.”

“Sponsor?” Hermione drawled.

He was here to donate? Him?

“Finally decided to grace us with your presence, have you?” mocked Astoria with a slight smirk on her face. She was sitting beside Malfoy. “Took you long enough.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows and checked her wrist watch. “Padma said 1:30.”

“Oh dear, she must’ve misheard me then,” Astoria replied, trying to sound innocent. “I told her 1:00.”

“I’m *sure* you did.”

“Ms. Granger,” Madam Dumass warned, noticing the venom in Hermione’s voice. She muttered a quick apology to Malfoy, then gave Hermione a glowering stare. “Take a seat.”

Hermione stayed rooted to the spot.

Silently, she prayed for the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

She had clearly walked into a trap. It was obvious, with that feral look that was present on his face. She shivered inwardly. He was here because he wanted something and what better way to get it than the only way he knew how? By sheer cunning and relentless manipulation... *very Slytherin*.

Or perhaps he just wanted to embarrass her in front of everybody by announcing their marriage.

“Is there something wrong?” Madam Dumass asked when she didn’t move.

I’m doomed.

Inhaling deeply, Hermione tried to gather up enough courage to face him. Finally, Hermione staggered forward, her movements stiff and clumsy.

His eyes never left her, even as she took a seat across him, even when the meeting continued on. She avoided his gaze the entire time.

She bowed her head and stared at her lap, as if it was the most fascinating thing in the world.

You're braver than this, she told herself. Yeah right.

She would play his game, no matter the consequences. She had to know what he wanted. She couldn't just back down without a fight.

Come on, you're a Gryffindor. Suck it up.

Meanwhile, Astoria was doing her best to catch Malfoy's attention. When they started discussing the ingredients to be used on the Denovorum, she wasted no time trying to impress him. "I'm sure we should just use the Vinewhip bushes *I* discovered—"

Hermione rolled her eyes. Why couldn't she just shut up about the bloody bushes already? She'd heard her say it a hundred times now.

"No we can't," Hermione interrupted. "Vinewhip leaves may be a great alternative ingredient, but the reason why I didn't want to use it is because it's too dangerous. There are properties in them that could affect the human body."

"There's only 20% chance of that ever happening," she countered, looking at Malfoy as if she was afraid he would disapprove.

"I don't care," Hermione snapped back, once again finding her voice. She'd had enough of Astoria's immaturity. "We can't take that risk. I told you this before you went off to Romincka, but did you listen?"

Astoria huffed in indignation. She probably thought Hermione was trying to embarrass her in front of Malfoy.

"I think it's reasonable that we use Vine whip," said a wizard seated three chairs from Hermione's right. She recognized him as one of Astoria's admirers "It's more effective..."

They droned on and on about the uses of Vinewhip, as if Hermione didn't already know. She rubbed her forehead with her hands.

She felt rather than saw Malfoy's eyes still burning a hole on her. He was awfully quiet. She didn't like it at all.

"What part of *dangerous* don't you people understand?" Hermione said loudly. "Vinewhip is used as a *poison*. It's mostly an ingredient for *poison*, not cure!"

Was this what Malfoy wanted? To fund a project that would legally distribute poisoned Denovorums to everyone?

A few people murmured in agreement, but Astoria's minions outnumbered them. It was clearly a losing battle. They weren't listening.

The feeling of emptiness filled her up again, she couldn't feel her heartbeat. She clutched her chest, trying to feel that rhythmic pounding but it was lost again.

Hermione couldn't take it anymore. If she stayed any longer, she would have no doubts that she would take out her wand and curse every single one of the stupid morons into oblivion, starting with that annoying creature devouring her with his stony greys, then that little bratty bint sitting beside him, shortly after. She stood from her chair and headed to the door, ignoring the confused voice of Madam Dumass as she went. Nobody else seemed to have noticed her, they were all busy arguing. *Good.* She had to get out of there, she needed to *breathe.*

“And where do you think you’re going?”

The sound of his deep voice drowned out everyone else’s. The room was silent immediately, all arguments quickly forgotten. It was the first time he’d said anything since the start of the meeting. His tone was intimidating, demanding, and Hermione couldn’t help but wonder how he’d managed to catch everyone’s attention with just one sentence. She stopped in her tracks but she didn’t look back.

“Out,” she said icily. *Away from you.* She opened the door.

Before she could even step outside, the door slammed shut on her face with an ear-splitting bang, making her jump. She gaped at it for a few seconds in shock and confusion before she snapped out of her trance and moved to unlock it with her wand. It wouldn’t budge.

Furious, she faced him. He was twirling his wand lazily in his fingers. “Open the door, Draco.”

He made no attempts to do so. He just stared at the wall with a calm smirk on his face. Slowly, he took a sip from his coffee.

“Sit.”

He was doing this on purpose. He was trying to get her to crack so that everything would go according to his plan, again, whatever that plan was. She was so close to losing her temper. She didn’t sit down.

“Ms. Granger,” Madam Dumass said calmly. “Mr. Malfoy is willing to give a large amount of money for your project—”

“I’m not doing this anymore. I don’t want his money,” she hissed, feeling her blood boil.

Everyone eyed her in surprise. They all knew how much she had wanted this project to push through. She’d been working her arse off for this. Now here he was, her volunteer donor, who would basically give her anything she needed, and yet she so easily turned him down.

Despite her rejection, Malfoy didn’t look surprised one bit. He faced her this time, with a predatory glance that almost made her look away. “Really? And what about those people?” He clicked his tongue again, his voice laced with mock disappointment. “You’re just going to let them *die?*”

She opened her mouth to say something, but the words died in her throat. At that very moment, when she was about to abandon all sympathy she felt for those sick people, she felt her heart beat again.

Unbelievable. Clever. He was using her conscience against her now. He was openly *questioning her morals*, so she would do something rash and let him have his way again.

“Sit,” he said again, arrogantly this time.

Nobody was talking anymore. Even Astoria kept her mouth shut.

They all looked at Malfoy with amusement and fear. He tended to have that effect on people.

Begrudgingly, Hermione dragged her feet on the floor and sat reluctantly in her chair again.

Draco watched her expression change as she battled with the contradicting thoughts in her mind. She was obviously thinking of a way out. He leaned back and enjoyed the show. She was beautiful when her face was scrunched in concentration. She must really hate him now but it didn’t bother him the slightest.

He knew what she was going to choose in the end.

She needed a fat load of galleons to complete a Denovorum that would help those people. Her moral compass wouldn’t allow her to just abandon them. She was much too *good*. She knew it.

...And so did he.

He stared at her again and smirked, irking her even more. Her chocolate-colored eyes sparked to life and her cheeks flushed red in anger, making her look even more breathtaking.

Oh Merlin, was she *pretty*.

She’d probably thought of a way out, judging by the look on her face. Her brilliant mind could do wonders. However, it remained that she still needed his money, so nevertheless she’d still have to agree to this. She waited for him to say something, but he didn’t utter a word. He placed his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his interlaced hands.

“Well?” she questioned impatiently, massaging her temples with her hand. “There must be a catch. What do you want?”

He lips curled into a triumphant smile. *I win.*

“Nothing.”

And her head snapped up to look at him, as if she couldn’t believe what he was saying. “Nothing? *N-Nothing?*”

“Yes, you heard me,” he said nonchalantly. “*Nothing.*”

After the meeting, Hermione locked herself in her office and shouted at everyone who would dare knock and disturb her peace.

Her mind was on overdrive.

She had been so sure she had found a way out of the game he had been playing... but when he'd said he wanted nothing... well... she'd lost it.

Nothing?

The word echoed in her mind, taunting her relentlessly. For him to offer help and want nothing in return, well, that was impossible. *What was going on?*

Had he finally come to his senses?

She decided to go to Harry's flat to tell him what had happened and to discuss the matter further. Hermione grabbed her things and headed to the fireplace in the lobby.

Before she could even get there, however, she felt a pair of arms wrap around her waist and muffle her screams of protest. Her attacker dragged her to an empty, dark room and locked the door.

Even in the dark, she could see his silver hair glistening. "Wha—?" Without warning, his soft lips crashed onto hers. She suddenly felt his growing need for her tenfold, as if she was water that would quench his thirst.

She struggled to push him off. "Will you stop—" she managed to say in between his brutal kisses. "—harassing me!"

"I can't," said a voice that she easily recognized, before he kissed her again. "So *addicting*."

"Draco!" she screamed, but he only grabbed her wrists with one hand, placed them above her head and kissed her again, silencing her and ending her struggles. His kisses were aggressive and bruising. He grabbed her breast and she gasped in shock, allowing his tongue to invade her mouth, forcing her to kiss back.

His other hand made its way to her thigh, inching higher and higher.

His every touch burned her skin.

Panicking, she bit his tongue as hard as she could, and he pulled away momentarily, only so he could smirk and lick the blood that escaped his lips.

"D-don't!" He leaned in again, much to her dismay.

"Running out of plans, dear?"

She tasted his blood in her mouth and felt his dominating magic rush over her along with it. She felt her legs collapse beneath her, his body the only thing keeping her up.

"I missed you," he said hoarsely, making her shudder involuntarily. He buried his hand in her tresses, tilted her head so he could start working his way on her neck, nipping and licking.

She bit her lips to suppress her moans. It felt so *good*. He kept licking and kissing, and touching her everywhere, it was driving her mad.

"Stay with me," he whispered softly.

In her dazed state of mind, she *almost* said yes.

“You’re tired,” he said, while still nipping her neck. His kisses sent electric jolts all over her body, leaving her breathless. “And lonely too. I feel it, you know.” His soft lips were on hers again. This time, however, it was more gentle, sweeter, and to her absolute horror, she actually *liked* it.

“Forget about everyone else for a moment and just stay with me.” His hand left her wrists and cupped her cheeks as he deepened their kiss, and she let her hands fall to her side.

She was frozen, too dazed to fight back, too hesitant to kiss back.

“Stay with me and you’ll never be alone again.”

Her heart skipped a beat.

His voice sounded soothing, sincere.

Or perhaps it was just her mind playing tricks on her.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer, as if he never wanted to let go, as if he was trying to mold their bodies into one. She felt his magic radiating in waves, dominating her intensely, tempting her in every way.

She felt like she belonged here, in his arms.

No! She mustn’t let him win.

It took every ounce of self-restraint she had inside her before she somehow managed to pull away from his kiss.

She felt a strange feeling of loss. Her breathing was uneven. She stared back at those beautiful eyes that had never stopped haunting her dreams.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

The silence between them was unbearable. His face was once again masked with cold impassiveness and she had no idea what he was thinking. Then, in a brief moment, she thought she saw his eyes burn with vengeful anger. He slammed her to the wall so hard that she groaned in pain. She couldn’t stop herself from cowering in fear.

“Do you really think that Potter’s silly little threats can stop me from getting you?” he laughed coldly, as if he found the whole thing comical. “We’re *bonded*, Granger. Blood and magic, *heart and soul*. I’ll have you eventually. I’m offering you an easy way out, but if you’re too stubborn to listen—” she winced when he leaned in her ear, his breath touching her skin “—then we’ll do this the hard way, Princess.”

She shut her eyes tight, thinking he would hurt her again. He only kissed her cheek, like he had so many times before.

“Enjoy your freedom while it lasts.”

When she opened her eyes, he was gone.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

So possessive :)) Oh noes, I'm scared for Hermione :))

Denovo means “reborn” or “beginning again” in latin. I know I didn’t explain the **Denovorum Potion** very well, but I will, next chapter.

Caballusi means horse in latin.

Romincka is a forest in Russia.

Vinewhip... well... I got that one from POKEMON \:D/

The feeling of emptiness filled her up again. Oxymoron bwahaha.

I added a lot of new characters here because Draco murdered the other characters already. TSK TSK.

Blaise, where are you?

It's the Order plus the Ministry versus Draco, I wonder what he'll do next...

Don't stop! Reviewing! Hold on to that feeeeeliiing!

Come on, I worked hard on this, at least let me know what you think :p

If you do get a chance to review, please add this sentence in the end: “I like pie.”

Don't ask me why! Just do it :)) It's important! :))

Chapter 6

Okay seriously, what is it with you guys and DUMASS? It's really a name, I promise! :)) It's just pronounced as doomas though, not dumb ass LOL. I'll change it if it's distracting you. Haha.

Thanks to all those lovely people who reviewed chapter 5. I want to hug you... *offers cupcakes*

And thanks to my grammar beta Pooja (murtagh799). She's amazing! Drop by her page and send her my love :)

Okay, here you go :)

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Hermione was in a state of paranoia again, pacing around the living room like some mad woman ready to murder anyone she could get her hands on. She was pulling her soft, curly locks and shouting obscenities in the air. She was jumpy and shaky and she felt as if the whole world was out to get her. Her best friend was seated on the couch, rubbing his temples roughly. He looked like he was in immense pain... or positively constipated.

“—and then he has the nerve to say he wanted nothing, **NOTHING**—!” she yelled, her voice abnormally high-pitched in uncontrolled anger. “It’s just not—just—AGH!”

She grabbed a pillow from the couch and slapped it furiously to her face to muffle her shrill screams.

“Hermione,” Harry said, eyeing her pacing form tiredly. “You’re making me dizzy. Will you just calm down for a moment?”

“Calm do—How can I *calm* down when he’s obviously using this as a ploy to get to me?” she moaned in frustration.

Hours and hours of research and reading contexts would do her no good this time. Draco was a complicated being. He had a different way of thinking, of doing things, and although his methods were extremely immoral and downright inhumane, she could not deny that they were *effective*.

She felt absolutely stupid when compared to him.

“What am I going to do!”

“Breathe,” Harry suggested, as if it was that simple. She glared at him and then continued her frivolous pacing. “Look, there’s no use avoiding him, since it’s obviously *not going to work*. Just be on guard. Oh, hang on.” Harry waved his wand and out of nowhere a muggle pen and a piece of paper appeared. He started writing quickly.

“What are you doing?”

“Sending a note to my associates,” he said as he continued to scribble on. “We’ll have your flat and your office warded, so he can’t use dark arts if he gets inside.”

“That’s not going to stop him.”

Harry glared at her. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that.”

He whistled and a black owl flew in through the open window and into his lap. He tied the letter to its leg and it flew off. “I’ve done some investigating and it turns out that for the whole five years he’d disappeared, he’d been staying in Muggle France.”

“Muggle France?” Hermione stopped her strides momentarily. “Draco Malfoy? Pureblood Supremacist, living a muggle life?” She looked at Harry as if he was joking.

“Yes, no wonder we couldn’t find him. It was the last place we would ever think to look,” Harry concluded.

Placing her palm on her forehead, Hermione gazed at her best friend more closely and frowned. He really looked exhausted and miserable and there were bags under his startlingly green eyes, tell-tale signs of lack of sleep. Hermione suddenly felt a pang of guilt build in her chest.

If it weren’t for her, he wouldn’t have been dragged into this mess.

She always caused trouble for everyone.

“What?” Harry looked at her questioningly, noticing her sudden silence. She shook her head and stared at the floor. She could feel Harry’s eyes on her. “You do know that this isn’t your fault, don’t you?”

She didn’t say anything. *He was wrong.* If it weren’t for her so many people would still be alive today.

“Listen to me, Hermione. You are not a bad person. You’re a very good person who bad things have happened to, you understand?” Harry told her in a serious tone. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it tight. “It’s not your fault. Now, tell me exactly how it happened again.”

“I already told you,” Hermione answered. “He came to my meeting, didn’t say a word, and only spoke when I was about to head out.”

“—and then he said he wanted nothing,” Harry finished, although he said it more to himself rather than to her.

“Yes.”

Thoughts of her and Malfoy *snogging* flashed in her mind again and she couldn’t help but feel her face heat up. How close she had been to agreeing to stay with him, she’d been so close to being manipulated by him. She felt disgusted with herself for almost falling for his charms.

Here was the man who had murdered Ron, celebrated their marriage by poisoning 18 people, watched happily as her fiancé (and her fiancé’s family) burned to death and

manipulated everyone to believe he was innocent. *Of course* she ought to consider staying with him. *The bloody psycho*.

What was she thinking?

“Perhaps I’ll just run away Harry, to Antarctica or something, someplace he can’t find me,” she muttered. The thought of living in the Malfoy Manor made her shudder; it was a place she wanted to forget.

Harry merely rolled his eyes at her. “Oh come off it. As if you would ever be that cowardly.”

Sighing deeply and closing her eyes, Hermione collapsed on the couch in defeat. He was right; she wouldn’t just run away like that. It wasn’t in her nature.

“I don’t know what else to do.”

Enjoy your freedom while it lasts, then?

She cursed under her breath and buried her face in the pillow again.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about it too much if I were you,” said a third voice.

Luna had just entered the room with a tray of tea and cups in her hands. She was wearing an oddly-shaped, polka-dotted apron enchanted to glow and blink, like one of those Muggle Christmas lights. She had a fanciful look on her face again and her wand was tucked securely behind her ear. She placed the tray on the table in front of them. “Tea?”

Hermione looked at Luna in confusion, not at all distracted by the bright, blinking apron or the pink highlights in her hair.

“And why shouldn’t I worry about it?” she asked.

Luna smiled dreamily. “Well he said he wanted nothing, didn’t he?” she replied in a quiet, aloof voice while pouring tea into one of the cups and handing it to Hermione. “So maybe he wants nothing.”

The ‘tea’ Luna poured out for her looked anything but. It was colorless, odorless, and it looked pretty much like a normal cup of clear water.

“I’m sorry Luna, but I find that hard to believe.” Hermione stared at Harry who drank his cup without hesitation. As soon as he did, his tense face relaxed and he looked ten times better than he had been a while ago.

“My wife thinks we should... trust him,” he said, his face scrunched horribly, like saying it brought him pain.

Hermione laughed at him loudly, thinking he was joking.

Apparently he wasn’t. Luna stared at her, protuberant eyes never blinking.

She cleared her throat in embarrassment and shook the cup in her hands, eyeing the clear liquid as it swirled. “Are you lot barking mad? *Trust him?*” She eyed the both of them as if they suddenly sprouted third heads.

“Just drink the tea, Hermione,” Luna said serenely.

Reluctantly, she took a sip of her 'tea.'

It tasted good, a little mild, a little sweet. Somewhat indescribable, unlike anything she had ever drank. It was indeed refreshing.

"What kind of tea is this?" she asked, suddenly forgetting why she was ranting in the first place.

"Novo," Luna replied happily.

The tea left a strong, smoky and bitter aftertaste in his mouth. He calmly set the cup down and stared at the two guests seated across him: a tall boy about his age, with high cheekbones, dark skin, and long, brown slanting eyes and a beautiful woman in her early 40's, with the same high cheekbones and slanting eyes, but her skin of a lighter shade.

It had been a while since he'd had guests in the Malfoy Manor.

"Blaise," he said calmly. "Mrs. Zabini... So glad to see you, again."

"Oh please, Draco, call me Brielle," the woman replied while giving him a small smile. "Did you enjoy your stay in our Mansion in France?"

"Oh yes, indeed," he said. "The view of the city was just divine."

"Glad to hear it, dear. It's the least we could do after all you've done for us," she said while staring at the maids who proceeded to refill their cup for them. "No house-elves, I see?"

"None," Draco said casually. "Freed them all."

Mrs. Zabini stared at him in surprise. "And may I ask why, *mon garçon*?"

Draco smirked.

"My wife wouldn't condone it," he said, and then turned to Blaise, who looked rather cross at the moment. He'd done a good job at hiding it though; his face was masked with an expression of cold indifference. If it weren't for the fact that they'd known each other practically all their lives, Draco wouldn't have noticed his silent anger. "Speaking of, how're your wife and kids, Blaise?"

Blaise's eyes met his. Despite being suddenly unnerved by Draco's intense gaze, he managed to sneer.

"As if you care."

Draco eyed him disdainfully. Mrs. Zabini started to examine her long, manicured nails and pretended not to listen.

"Merlin, you're right. I don't care," he chuckled and leaned back in his chair. "We haven't seen each other in five years. I was just trying to make conversation."

Furious, Blaise banged his fist on the table, making a few expensive china wares fall off and break. He paid no mind to it and continued to stare at Draco in anger.

His mother took a sip from her cup, as if her son and Draco weren't even there.

“How can you be so calm about this? Again?” Blaise hissed furiously. “Potter’s out to get you, the Order, the Ministry! For Merlin’s sake, even *his* remaining followers are after you! You’re completely alone with this and you’re not even doing anything!”

Draco’s face was impassive. He showed no signs of being worried or stressed. Blaise knew he should be used to Draco’s numb personality by now, but he just couldn’t help himself.

He wanted to slap some sense into him.

“Honestly. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of a few... *obstacles*.” Draco’s laughter sounded cold and humorless and Blaise remembered this quality far too well. “Besides, I’m not alone at all.”

Blaise stared at Draco with a blank expression. Five years ago, Draco had jumped from the Astronomy Tower in front of his very eyes. Blaise had never known why he’d done it, he’d never understood Draco at all, no matter how hard he had tried. He vaguely remembered feeling miserable and lost in the aftermath...

And then one silent night, a month after his *supposed death*, Draco barged into his room.

“Missed me?”

To say that he was shocked was an understatement. Draco was supposed to be dead, and now here he was, in the flesh, looking very much alive.

“I need your help,” he said, as he closed the door of Blaise’s room behind him. “I need your house in France.”

Blaise just continued to stare at him, frozen to the spot. “You—you’re supposed to be—”

“Dead?” he finished for him, while letting out a soft chuckle. “Well I’m not. So about France—”

He continued to talk to Blaise about his plan, perfectly calm and composed, as if he hadn’t jumped from the Astronomy Tower at all, as if he hadn’t been accused of murder, as if the Aurors hadn’t been looking for his dead corpse. Blaise couldn’t understand it. He couldn’t understand any of it.

“Draco! Stop!” Blaise yelled, making Draco stop in midsentence. “You’ve just been dubbed as Undesirable Number 2. They want you, despite the fact that you’re supposed to be dead. What makes you think I’ll just let you stay at our Mansion in France? Do you know how extremely dangerous that is for me? For my family?”

Draco only smirked at him.

“You’re still loyal to me.”

He didn’t say anything for the longest time.

If anything, Draco was right. Blaise had been loyal to him from the very start.

He had made everyone believe he hadn’t been Draco’s accomplice five years ago at the Winter Masquerade Massacre. He had led Potter to the Astronomy Tower so Draco could finish him off. He had asked his mother to let Draco stay in France. He had convinced his

wife, Ginny Weasley Zabini, to live in London instead of Romania (their original plan), so he could keep a watchful eye on Granger for him.

He had also befriended Viktor Krum and had encouraged him to propose.

Blaise could be manipulative if he wanted to be.

He looked down on almost everyone, he was just that kind of person. But Draco was different, and no matter what happened, he would *always* be loyal to him.

“You can’t keep hiding and running like this Draco,” Blaise replied. His dark eyes had a faraway look in them. “We’re going to need a plan if we want to—”

“And what, Blaise, makes you think I don’t already have one?”

“Oh there are a lot of amazing healers, researchers and *Unexhibitables* here at the Department of Magical Research and Development, but none of them could ever be compared to healer Granger. She’s all that and so much more!” said the rather short, mousey haired boy in front of him. Dennis Creevey, was it? Draco continued to listen. “She can do almost everything! She discovered that Dragonscale leaves have more than 5 uses, then she found a cure for the black beetle stings which killed a lot of wizards centuries ago, she translated the runes of Ancient Mythology and had them *rewritten* and *memorized* and let’s not forget the Denovorum! Sweet Godric, I suppose you know about that one already, though—it’s very hard to make!”

His brown eyes flashed excitement and admiration as he addressed Hermione as some kind of Demigoddess sent from the heavens. “She’s also very compassionate too! Did you know she’s fighting for the freedom of house-elves and squib rights as well? She’s so amazing!”

“Glad to hear that, Dennis. I was a little worried that she wasn’t capable of finishing the Denovorum,” he said.

It was obviously a lie. Of course he had no doubts that Hermione could finish the potion with her eyes closed, but he had to tell this boy something to get him to talk.

“Worry no more, Mr. Malfoy!” Dennis beamed at him, fondling the camera in his hands. “She could do it in a heartbeat! She’s the best!”

I know.

“You seem to like her a lot,” Draco stated plainly, trying his best to hide his irritation. He knew Creevey wasn’t really a threat but he felt annoyed with him anyway.

“Yes, I’m her number one fan,” the boy said, puffing his chest to show him how proud he was. “I took the internship here because of her.”

“Really now?” He pretended to sound interested, and then he motioned for Creevey to follow him. “That’s a nice camera you have there.”

“Yeah... it’s my brother’s.”

Draco didn’t fail to see the sad, haunted look in his eyes. He smirked inwardly.

“So tell me more about healer Granger...”

Everyone was frantic at work today. They were on their *best* behavior, wearing their *best* robes, and doing their *very best*. Hermione openly stared, dumbfounded, as her co-workers rushed about, actually *doing their work* and being *productive*. On ordinary days they would just lounge around and gossip about this or that, but today it was completely different.

She felt like she was in an alternate universe.

“Did—did I miss something?” Hermione asked Padma Patil, who was standing beside her as she stared at the productive chaos. “Am I in heaven?”

“They’ve been like this all morning,” said Padma in an amused tone. “Draco Malfoy is here, again. I guess they all want to impress him.”

Hermione almost jumped at the sudden mention of his name. Then, she stared at Padma in disbelief. “Are you telling me... that he got everyone to work hard just by his presence alone? Something I’ve been trying to do during my entire stay here?”

“Well, yes,” said Padma. Hermione cursed under her breath. “Oh come on Hermione, now that the Ministry has confirmed his innocence, he’s back to being influential. A *Malfoy*. He’s rich and powerful, and he’s handsome to boot. It’s only natural to want to please him.”

Then Padma leaned on her and spoke in hushed tones. “He’s been asking me about you.”

Hermione flinched. “What did he—”

“If you want to know why Draco Malfoy’s here, he’s checking to see if his money’s being put to good use,” said a person from behind them. They both turned around to find Astoria Greengrass walking towards them, wearing a very short black skirt and a green top that showed off a lot of cleavage.

“What do you want, Greengrass?” Padma asked icily.

“Nothing that concerns you, Patil,” Greengrass told Padma condescendingly. Then she turned to face Hermione and smirked. “You know he talked to me this morning, Draco Malfoy. And guess what? He seemed to be really interested in me.”

“Oh really?” Hermione said, while turning to walk away, determined to stay away from Astoria.

But Astoria grabbed her arm, “Oh yes. In fact with the way he was looking at me, I think it’s only a matter of time before he makes a move.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “You know, I really don’t care.”

“For your information, Greengrass, Draco Malfoy asked about Hermi—” Padma started to say, but Hermione cut her off. She stared back at Hermione. “What?”

Hermione didn’t really want anyone to find out about her and Draco.

“Jealous, Granger?” said Greengrass, completely ignoring Padma. “Scared that I might convince him to reconsider his offer of funding your project? The Denovorum is a

complicated potion, what makes you think you can actually succeed in making one?"

"It's just a matter of patience and skill, Greengrass," Hermione said, her fists clenching in anger. "But you wouldn't know about that, would you? You don't have any."

"You little bitc—"

She walked away before Astoria could finish, but not before relishing the sight of the cow's face flush red in anger.

The Department of Magical Research and Development was an old historical building beside the Ministry of Magic, built during the late 16th century. The outside was constructed in baroque style, with bold massing, twisted columns, a dome, and the bold play of volume and void. There were no doors for entry, but fireplaces stationed in the lobby instead. It was disguised as an old, abandoned building in the eyes of muggles.

The inside interior was amazing, more beautiful than even that of Hogwarts. The entrance lobby had a frescoed ceiling painted by a famous painter who had died some years ago.

It had twenty floors in total: six floors for the offices, conference halls and work related matters, two floors for the library, five floors for the laboratories and experiment conducting rooms. And the remaining floors were the seven floors of *whimsical wonder*.

At least that's how Hermione had classified them. She giggled inwardly as she descended from the staircases. It was quite silly actually, but she had deemed the title appropriate, much like S.P.E.W

The Seven Floors of Whimsical Wonder (S.F.O.W.W) was the part of the building that was located underground. It was the place where they kept numerous magical artifacts and creatures from around the world. It was sort of like a museum. However, the items weren't for the public, they weren't even for display. They were there to be studied, contained and guarded.

The *Unexhibitables* were the only ones allowed to see them. They were a group of wizards and witches who worked in the DMRD (their identities classified for security reasons). Unexhibitables of the Department of Magical Research and Development were forbidden from exhibiting the artifacts or disclosing any information about what they saw in their research, hence the title, "Unexhibitible."

As beautiful and historical they were, the artifacts they studied had one thing in common: they were all dangerous.

That's why her heart raced and her breath hitched when she found Draco himself standing in front of the entrance.

She made sure her wand was in her hand before she decided to approach him, tiptoeing as quietly as she could.

He looked amazing and impeccable as usual, no wonder they were all trying to please him. His white sleeves were rolled to his elbows and his hands disappeared into his pockets,

making him look laid-back and relaxed. He was examining the vault-like door carefully, and he had a very calculating look in his grey eyes.

She couldn't help but stare longer, trying to memorize the curvature of his shoulders and the different shades of silver that crowned his head, gleaming in the light.

She compared his exquisiteness as something similar to the frescoed ceiling in the lobby. It was fascinating, the way he looked so strong and gentle, so still and graceful at the same time, almost like a piece of living, breathing human art.

"Hello Princess," he said suddenly, eyes still focused on the door. The sound of his voice snapped her out of her thoughts.

"What are you doing?"

"I think it's quite obvious, isn't it?" he said mockingly. "I'm staring at this door *intensely*."

"Yes, but why?" Hermione asked as she neared him, her wand aimed at the back of his skull. He remained immobile. "You're not planning to go in there, are you?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps I am."

"Step back," she said warily, her voice getting a bit louder. "Step back or I'll hex you."

This time he cocked his head to the side and looked at her. His gaze sent shivers down her spine. For a moment she felt her heart lose its beat again.

His lips curled upward into a smile, or a smirk, more appropriately. Malfoys never smiled, she reminded herself.

"Alright, as you wish," he said simply. He backed a few steps.

Hermione blocked his path from the door, told him to turn around and start walking. Surprisingly, he obeyed. Her wand was now aimed at his lower back as she walked closely behind him.

It scared her, the way he had looked at the vault-like door back there. She knew it was heavily guarded and protected, that no one was allowed in unless they were permitted to.

But this was *Draco Malfoy*, chosen heir to the Dark Lord himself. He had stolen the Luteus stone from the Department of Mysteries at the ripe age of 16.

He was capable of many things.

"So tell me," he said casually, breaking the silence with his deep, alluring voice and snapping her out of her thoughts again. "Have you been enjoying your freedom so far, love?"

Hermione winced at his statement, feeling the hairs on the back of her neck stand.

It was infuriating; how he always knew the right words to say to get her riled her up, to get her to lose focus.

"I heard Potter placed wards on your flat," he began again. How did he know that? "Ever the moron, isn't he? As if that's ever going to stop me."

That's what I told him.

“Don’t be so full of yourself,” she said icily while glaring at the back of his head, feeling the need to defend Harry. “Don’t underestimate him or the Order. That’s what Voldemort did. And look where it got him.”

Draco snorted.

“Have you forgotten that I outsmarted your precious Order twice already? That I almost killed Potter five years ago?” He looked back once more, eyeing her condescendingly. “What makes you think I can’t do it again?”

Hermione tightened the grip on her wand. His arrogance made her blood boil even more. She wanted to retaliate but didn’t say anything. He was just trying to mess her up again. She continued to force him to walk.

They were almost near the staircases to the lobby now. Almost to an area populated with people...where she’d be safe.

A few more minutes of endurance... She mustn’t let him affect her.

“I don’t know why you’re so hung up about this anyway,” he continued to taunt her. “We both know you’re going to live at the Manor in the end.”

“Not if I could help it, you bastard,” she said, her voice shaking in anger. “You murdered my fiancé.”

She knew he hadn’t killed Viktor directly but he might as well have.

Suddenly, Draco stopped his strides and faced her, catching her slightly off guard. He had an evil glint in his eyes, again, making him look like a deranged psychopath ready to kill, but still incredibly handsome all the same. She backed a few steps away from his towering form, trying hard not to look away. His smirk widened when he noticed the delicious fear imprinted in her eyes as he stepped forward.

“You don’t even love him.”

The way he said it, like he knew it all along, like it was the *truth*. She saw memories flash in her mind in an instant: of a dark-haired man with a strong build, of Quidditch and flying, of his beautiful face, his lips brushing against hers.

“I—I—” she stuttered.

The memories of Viktor were coming back in *full force*. She had no idea how he’d done it. He wasn’t supposed to have her memories. She groaned in pain. Her head felt like it was being hammered.

She clutched her head, felt her wand slip from her shaking fingers. The pain was completely *unbearable*.

“What are you doing to me?”

Without having a chance to fight back, she felt his strong hands grip her waist, stopping her from an untimely collapse. She melted into his arms and let him support her body.

She didn’t know why she felt so relieved, so safe... here, now, *with him*, when she was supposed to be feeling the complete opposite.

“Letting you remember your feelings for *Krum*...” He answered truthfully. ‘Or lack thereof. That’s what you want, isn’t it?’ His face darkened and his grip on her tightened. “Don’t worry, I won’t give all your memories back to you, just enough to let you know how much you... *felt about him*.”

He drawled the last words in obvious revulsion. Her vision blurred and she was forced to close her eyes for a long time. She tried to ignore the pain, to focus on Draco’s voice instead. She refused to scream, to let him know how much pain she was feeling.

She remembered another moment she had with Viktor, only bits and pieces. She knew she should feel something for him right about now, but she felt absolutely nothing.

“You’ll be fine,” he whispered gently in her ear. “I won’t let anything bad happen to you.”

Damn him for doing this.

“*Draco*—” she wanted to sound as though the burning ache wasn’t affecting her, but she was sure her voice came out as a small crack. She had to distract herself from the pain. “Do you feel... different when you’re around me?”

Draco laughed at her, as if she was being stupid. “Yes, *always*.”

She ignored the little flutter on her stomach.

“How different?”

She moved her head to look up at him, or rather; she tried but felt the pain intensify when she did. Draco pulled her head to his chest. “*Granger*,” he scolded. “Don’t move your head so much.”

“Just answer the question, *Malfoy*,” she groaned, feeling another shot of pain.

“Feisty, are we?” he said, while sighing deeply. “Well if you must know, I feel—” he paused, hesitating for a moment. “I feel warm.”

She swallowed a lump in her throat.

“It’s the bond, *Princess*,” he said quietly, calmly brushing his fingers through her hair. “You can feel what I feel and vice versa.”

So then, that empty feeling she felt every time she was near him, that was how he felt all the time?

“But—” Another memory of Viktor flashed in her mind again, one where she’d watched and cheered for him during the Quidditch World Cup. *She chose to ignore it.* “—how could that be, you... You feel so... so empty.”

She took deep, calming breaths greedily and tried her best to stay conscious. The world was spinning and shaking. She had numerous flashes of memories come back to her, but her mind was solely focused on Draco and nothing else.

She couldn’t help but feel sad for him. A part of her desperately wanted to help him. It was absolutely ridiculous. He didn’t deserve her mercy, not when he wasn’t capable of showing any himself in the first place.

“Feeling better?” Draco asked.

Finally, after a few more minutes of torture, the mental assault was gone.

She lifted her heavy lids carefully and found that her vision had finally returned to normal. Her gaze met his and they stayed like that for what seemed like hours, lost in each other's eyes. Until she finally snapped out of her trance and pulled away.

No one was in the lobby anymore as it was already very late. It was where he had supported her when she had been dizzy from the effects of receiving her memories.

She headed towards a fireplace and grabbed a pinch of Floo powder as quickly as she could, feeling uncomfortable, angry and confused.

“See, I told you Princess... you don't love him,” Draco said before she could leave, his eyes a fierce shade of stormy grey. “You love *me*.”

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Oh Merlin, does she? :O

Unexhibitables — I invented that one, patterned it to Ms. Rowling's Unspeakables. It sounds really weird, I know. I was almost tempted to just use Unmentionables instead. Nyaha.

Novo — means refreshed in latin.

Dragonscale leaves — Invented

Black Beetle Stings — Invented

Department of Magical Research and Development — Invented. It's beside the Ministry of Magic, one half is underground, the other half isn't.

Seven Floors of Whimsical Wonder. Like wtf? :)) Tell me I'm not going crazy.

My Slytherins are so manipulative. Yum.

I couldn't find the name of Blaise's mother anywhere in the books, so I googled a new one :D

Yes, Blaise married Ginny. I mentioned this in HBHE. I tried to stick to non-cannon pairings as much as possible. I dunno why...

OI! READ & REVIEW. I failed my exams in Accounting because of this... *runs in a dark corner and cries*

Haha. Just kidding. I hope I hear from you :)

Chapter 7

I wanted to update earlier but I kept changing things. I'm entirely unsure about this chapter. If you find errors it's probably because I tried to change things even after it was beta-ed. hahaha.

WARNING : THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS DARK THEMES. No joke :O

To clear things up: when I say heart, I mean feeling and loving. I didn't mean Draco *literally* didn't have a heart. That's just crazy :))

I have an update area in my page, so if you want to know the progress of my stories, just check it out.

Thanks to my lovely beta POOJA, (damn, I really love her name!) murtagh799. She's bloody brilliant! Drop by her page and send her my love :D

And thanks to all the beautiful people who reviewed chapter 6. *offers pepperoni-flavored donuts*

Here you go then :)

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

“What do you mean *you’re coming with me?*” she howled in horror, her jaw hitting the ground.

Draco paid her no mind and entered her flat while she was too stunned to stop him. Not that she could have anyways, even if she tried.

He made his way to the sitting room with such ease, eyeing the place in interest. It was furnished with the occasional sofa, chairs, a table, a bookshelf and a fireplace. The walls were covered with cream striped wallpaper. It looked like a normal sitting room that was cozy, welcoming and very *small*.

It was like a broom closet, actually, compared to the one in the Manor.

“You—you can’t— come with me. That trip is strictly for Unexhibitables only!” By this time, Hermione had finally come to her senses and stomped her way towards him. “Not to mention, you’re not trained to deal with these sorts of things! Malfoy! Are you even listening to me?”

He stared at the pictures atop her fireplace, (muggle pictures, since they were not moving), and traced his fingers lightly over the porcelain frames.

“I can’t come, I’m not trained, the trip is strictly for Unexhibitables only,” he said lazily, not sparing her another glance. “Are you done?”

He continued to explore the rest of her flat, walking to the kitchen with supreme confidence, as if he very well owned the place.

Hermione followed him angrily, gripping his robes like a spoilt child and telling him to get out. He found it rather cute, the way she would carelessly touch him knowing what he had done in his past, what he was capable of. She was finally comfortable around him and it only taken her five years and a traditional marriage bond.

Honestly.

He grabbed the hand that was still attached to his robes and dragged her with him as he observed the other rooms of her flat. He inhaled deeply, taking in her unique scent. The whole place felt like her... her essence, her aura, her addicting smell. He felt another small pounding in his chest, one that was decidedly not his own.

Five years ago he would have jumped out of a hundred feet high window at the prospect of having a heart. His whole life had been built without it. He had been forced to conceal his emotions, for they were nothing but weaknesses that clouded his mind, hindrances that kept him from gaining more power. But when he had sealed the bond and tied their souls together, he hadn't expected to see the whole world change before his eyes. He hadn't expected to *feel something* again.

It had driven him mad, mad enough to want to kill himself. But not mad enough to leave Granger.

Now he relished it, his *heart*, he accepted it with open arms. *Somewhat...* Well to be honest, the thought of having a heart still disgusted him. But *sharing a heart with her*, that was a different thing altogether.

Of course he still killed and manipulated, but at least now he felt a little remorse. *Just a little.*

That counted as something, right? *Right?*

She hadn't carried her wand with her, and he grabbed at the opportunity to explore her little abode without having to worry about being hexed. He made his way to the stairs to her room, still dragging her along with him despite her desperate struggling and screaming. He loved the feel of her hand in his and he never wanted to let go.

Never.

The aura in her room felt a tad bit different.

He felt the magical energy shift as soon as he entered the white room. It had a different feel of magic, magic that made him feel light-hearted and lenient.

It angered him immediately.

Had she been sleeping with another man? She couldn't have. *She wouldn't dare.*

"What's wrong with your room?" he demanded all of a sudden, eyes flashing menacingly at her. "Who else is sleeping here?"

She stared back in alarm, knowing all too well what that look on his face meant.

Hermione could see right through him now, probably because of the bond they shared. The bond allowed them to know what the other was feeling, and since he was a numb, heartless bastard most of the time, she could feel that too. It was a frightening, cold feeling, so unlike the *warmth* she was accustomed to.

“No—no one,” she replied, barely audible. He gripped her hand harshly and forced her to look in his eyes, causing her to shudder.

“Tell the truth,” he said coldly. “The atmosphere changed when we entered.”

Her eyes widened and her lips trembled. She looked both ways, avoiding his eyes. She stubbornly tried to get away from him again but his hold stifled her futile attempts. He grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him once more.

She wouldn’t dare lie to him. She knew it would be unwise.

“Luna!” she said. “She cast a spell here a week ago! I’m the only one sleeping here, no one else!”

“Lovegood?” he asked while raising an eyebrow. “*Potter*. Now why would she do that, love?”

“She-she said she was getting rid of the Ca-Caballusi Fairies.” She placed her trembling hands on the one grabbing her chin and squeezed it lightly. “There is no one else.”

Satisfied, he gave her a soft kiss on the lips, drinking in her delicious fear.

“See, Princess, that wasn’t so hard,” he said, pressing so close that their noses were touching.

He stared at her a little longer, admiring her delicate lips as she panted under his brutal scrutiny. She wasn’t gorgeous like the other women he had been with... but she was *beautiful*. He was mesmerized by her, her lovely cheeks and freckles, her riot of curls and dazzling brown eyes, like chocolate: sweet, addicting and deliciously decadent.

She was perfect.

Hermione eyed him suspiciously as he entered her messy room. He first went to the bed and traced his fingers on the red sheets. Then he went to the windows and checked the view. He stared at the different scrolls on her study and read a few titles on her bookshelf. Seeing him there made her feel uneasy.

She kept reminding herself that Harry had had her house warded; it was the only thing keeping her from running and screaming bloody murder right about now.

Bravery was scarce when she was with Draco Malfoy.

“Why are you even here, anyway?” she said, never taking her eyes off him. “You could have just told me the *bad news* tomorrow, at work.”

He opened her closet, frowned, and then opened the door of her bathroom and disappeared inside.

“I wanted to see you.”

Hermione shifted uncomfortably.

“Besides, I’ve never seen your flat before,” she heard him say. “Never knew it was so... interesting.”

He exited the bathroom with a devilishly handsome smirk on his face and he towered over her again. “But it doesn’t matter, really.” He reached for a stray lock of her hair and brushed it off her face gently. “You’ll be leaving this place soon enough.”

She sent him the coldest glare she could muster but he wasn’t fazed the least bit.

“No, I won’t.”

He smirked again. “Whatever helps you sleep at night, Princess.” And he was gone again.

“Dennis? Alright there?” Hermione asked, her voice laced with genuine concern for the brown haired boy who was currently sitting in front of her. They sat on the stools of the third level laboratory, discussing the sap of a Morning Glory flower, a particular ingredient that she needed for the Denovorum.

He had a dejected look on his face and he didn’t have his excited, radiant aura that he usually carried about him. No, today he was quiet. He wasn’t even remotely paying attention to the conversation.

Dennis jumped out of his thoughts and stared at her with wide eyes.

“Oh, Merlin! I’m sorry Healer Granger! I got distract—” his hand accidentally collided with a glass test tube, making it fall to the ground and shatter. “Oh Merlin, I’m sorry again!”

He knelt on the ground quickly and started picking up the broken pieces, forgetting his wand that was currently lying on the table.

Hermione frowned at him. “Dennis.” She waved her wand and the test tube repaired itself and flew back to the rack.

Dennis scratched his head in embarrassment and grinned sheepishly at her.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” she said.

Hermione stared at him and waited for him to say something. She couldn’t deny that she had a soft spot for the boy. She remembered the first time she had met Dennis at St. Mungo’s, when she had been volunteering as a healer. He had been a patient there and one day had wandered off to the room she’d been in and started talking to her.

“Sweet Godric, you’re Hermione Granger!” he said, enthusiastically shaking her hand.

Hermione nodded politely. She was used to people coming up to her and knowing her name. Her part in the war had made her famous.

“I’ve heard so much about you!” He eyed her in amazement. “You’re—”

Harry Potter's best friend, I know.

“—the most brilliant witch of our time! You've done so much! Bloody genius, you are!”

Hermione blushed in embarrassment, taken aback. She had not expected someone to praise her for her achievements or intellect, it rarely happened. She was always dubbed as Harry Potter's best friend and nothing else. “Not really, no—”

“And humble too,” he said, more to himself rather than her. “I'm so glad I got to meet you!”

He was really a fragile-looking boy, with a pale complexion and an abnormally thin physique. However, his personality contrasted with his frail condition. He was a lively, cheerful person in this otherwise dark, unforgiving world. He had managed to stay positive about life, despite everything that had happened to him.

“My brother was a Gryffindor too, you know, like us,” he said happily, waving his hands to emphasize his point.

She couldn't help but smile. His enthusiasm was contagious.

“Yes, I knew him,” she said fondly. “He used to take pictures of everybody with his camera.”

“Yeah, he did. Mostly Harry Potter,” he said eagerly and he chuckled. “There was this one time when he climbed a tree to get a clear shot of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Bloody wanker.”

“Oh yeah, I remember that one! He fell on his bum and complained he had butt issues the next day.”

They both laughed.

“I miss him. Sometimes I even wonder what he felt before he—you know...” he trailed off.

“I know he felt happy, Dennis, happy for being able to stand up for what he believed in. He was a Gryffindor, through and through. We are all proud of him.”

He beamed. “He was brave till the very end, wasn't he?”

“Yes. Yes he was.”

Hermione knew he was really sick, of a nameless disease that had been passed down in magical history for quite some time now, a condition where a person of a certain disposition loses his ability to wield magic.

She found him sitting on the hospital bed with scraps of colorful paper and crayons in his hands. He looked up and smiled at her when she entered.

“For the children,” he said, before she could even ask. He was talking about the sick children admitted in the hospital. “I’ve been talking to the whole lot of them!”

She grabbed a get-well-soon card lying at the foot of his bed.

“Pag-asa?” she read questioningly.

“Hope,” he replied, fondly.

But Hermione couldn’t help but think that no matter how much hope he had for the cure of others, he had none for himself.

They said it would consume you.

A small ounce of magic every minute of every waking day...

No matter how much you try to fight it, to overpower it, it would do no good. Before you know it, you’d be dead, sucked dry. Some said it was even worse than a Dementor’s kiss.

“I’m going to die soon,” he muttered quietly, catching Hermione completely off guard.

“Don’t say that, Dennis,” she said in a serious tone. “You know they’re doing their best to help you.”

“This isn’t an ordinary disease, Hermione,” he said calmly. “There is no cure.”

“Wh-what?” Hermione said, outraged. He must be lying. “What? That’s—I don’t believe it! There must be something!”

Dennis shook his head and smiled, telling her to calm down. “I’m just scared of not having enough time.”

She felt bile rise in her stomach. This boy was a ray of sunshine. He was always making her smile and happy. He was kind and caring.

He offered so much love to the world.

Was he really going to die so young?

The Denovorum was the only potion that could save him, the only cure to his condition.

So she’d started researching about it and proposed a project to get it done. She’d travelled to different parts of the world to collect the rare ingredients, no matter how tiring and life-threatening it was. She’d do whatever it took.

For Dennis... and for everyone else who was suffering through the same condition...

The boy eyed her sadly, covering his face with both hands and shaking his head.
“I lost my camera.”

“Well of course, *you* have to do it,” said the girl in front of her, haughtily. “It’s your potion and I just got my nails done. I don’t want to get *mud* all over them.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at the intended insult.

She was in the first level of S.F.O.W.W. with Greengrass, trying to collect sap from a fascinating little Morning Glory with absolute caution. The 1st floor looked peculiar in every sense of the word. It looked like an empty cave: cold, dim and moist, with its pointy, jagged rocks. It was an odd place to plant a Morning Glory, a plant that lived off of the sun. But this particular flower was different from the rest.

It was special because its bushes had been cultivated on the soil of Helga Hufflepuff’s grave. It had many magical properties, which they could certainly use for the Denovorum.

The flower looked harmless in every way, but it was anything but. Certain things happened when one approached it *incorrectly*. She had to make sure the atmosphere didn’t shift when she neared it. Her magical energy could cause that to happen.

She cast a Magical Concealment charm around herself to suppress her magic temporarily. It was simple, really, much like holding your breath, but for a very long period of time.

Astoria was her partner today. She had wanted someone else, anyone else, but Madam Dumass had noticed that they weren’t getting along very well, which was, quote, “inappropriate behavior for Unexhibitables”. She had been trying to get them to work together ever since the meeting. The two of them were disgusted with the idea, but unfortunately neither had a say in the matter.

So now they were stuck here, until she had managed to collect the sap from the Morning Glory, which was the only plant in the otherwise empty cave.

Greengrass really wasn’t as dumb as she seemed to be. She was very intelligent and cunning and everyone liked her. She had half the people at work wrapped around her beautiful, manicured finger.

Hermione couldn’t count how many times Greengrass had tried to get her fired, arrested or even injured. One time, she had even messed with one of Hermione’s elixirs, purposely spilling an ingredient that had caused the mixture to sprout fire everywhere.

Unsurprisingly, because of her beauty, brains and cunning she always got away with it.

The only reason why Hermione had agreed to the arrangement was because she was sure Astoria wouldn’t dare try anything today, not when everyone knew she was responsible for Hermione’s safety.

At least, Hermione hoped she wouldn’t.

Hermione shrugged the nasty thoughts off her mind and tried to focus. She had to have total concentration to keep her magic at bay. She took a few steps forward to the little plant

placed in the center of the dimly lit cave.

Each step was like a death trap. One wrong move and this beautiful little Morning Glory could explode and kill her. She wasn't sure what kind of trap would be set off if she screwed up, since they were different almost every time. The last time an Unexhibitible tried to get near the plant without nullifying her magic, the plant had sent poisonous fumes that almost ended her life. Hermione shivered at the idea.

"Hurry up, Granger," Astoria said irritably in a high-pitched voice that lacked its usual perfection. She always used that tone when she was alone with Hermione. "I don't have all day."

"Well then shut up," she responded angrily. "I can't concentrate with you blabbering about."

She heard Astoria snort somewhere behind her. Hermione could tell the cow was just waiting for her to mess up. She mustn't give her the satisfaction.

Hermione was already far from the safety of the wards. She felt her body tremble as she inched farther away from Astoria, felt slight perspiration form on her forehead.

The plant was within arms reach now and pretty soon, she would be able to touch its leaves. She stopped a bit to admire the flower, fascinated by its blue and purple petals. It really is a wonder how something so small could be so powerful and dangerous. Carefully, she extracted the sap with the tip of her wand.

She took a vial from her pocket and transferred the sap within.

Thank Godric.

Hermione sighed in relief and started making her way back, when she felt a familiar shift in the atmosphere.

"What?"

Her Magical Concealment Charms had just collapsed!

She felt unbelievably stupid. *Really*, she couldn't even cast a proper Concealment charm! What the hell! Astoria was probably guffawing at her stupidity right about now. What was wrong with her?

Frightened, Hermione looked back at the flower.

She didn't have time to think as the ground beneath her started shaking violently, and to her utter horror, it began to crack. Not just small cracks either, *massive ones*, with thunderous echoes bouncing off the cave walls and dust and debris spreading everywhere. She ran as fast she could to Astoria, to the safety wards, as the solid earth plummet into a pit.

She almost made it, but she hadn't been fast enough. The ground buckled beneath her and she jumped managing to grab onto the edge of the safety point for dear life.

"Help!" she yelled at Greengrass, trying hard not to look at the bottomless pit beneath her and praying that her hold would not slip. She felt her heart hammer at an exhilarating pace,

felt her limbs stretch painfully with her weight. Astoria stood above her, perfectly calm about the whole situation. She looked down at Hermione and nudged her head.

“Oh look, leeches.”

Hermione swallowed a lump in her throat and willed herself to look down. Sure enough, huge, black, blood-sucking leeches formed at the bottom of the once endless pit. *Were they even there before? Of course not, this was all part of the Morning Glory's magic!* If she hadn't been so scared she would have been fascinated.

“I really did just get my nails done,” Greengrass said mockingly, examining her already flawless nails. “Hmm. Let's see... I'll come crying to everyone and tell them how I tried to save you, how I tried to hoist you up from the depths but I just wasn't strong enough. I couldn't use magic, of course—”

“This is insane!” Hermione shouted. “Stop fooling around and help me!”

“I'm not fooling around, Granger,” Astoria said. Her face suddenly darkened. “Is it so wrong to want you dead?”

Hermione paled at her words. She wasn't *serious*, was she?

The look on Astoria's face answered her question for her.

“They'll know you did this on purpose,” Hermione hissed. “They know how much you hate me.”

Her high-pitched laughter echoed in along the cavern walls.

“Yes, Granger, I hate you. No, I *despise* you,” she spat. “I hate that everyone thinks you're so bloody perfect, that you're a bloody war hero and you're Harry fucking Potter's best friend! Like fuck! If I have to listen to another one of Creevey's rubbish stories about your rubbish *greatness*, I'll go barking mad!”

Merlin, aren't you already?

Hermione felt her hand slowly losing its grip on the edge but she clutched on harder and ignored the pain as the rough rocks dug into her skin, drawing blood. *Hold on, Hermione. I am not going to let myself die like this.*

“And then there was Krum! The bastard! He chose you over me.”

“Astoria,” Hermione said calmly, making the mistake of looking down again and seeing the leeches. She suddenly felt nauseous. “You have to calm down. Just pull me up and—”

“You ruined everything for me! I made it in! I made it in here and I'm a bloody Unexhibitible for the love of Merlin! BUT NOBODY CARED BECAUSE THEY FUCKING WORSHIPPED YOU!”

Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing. She had always known that the girl hated her, but to hate her so much as to want her dead?

“I hate that you get everything you want! I hate that they look up to you and see you as a perfect little angel, when the truth is all you'll ever be is a filthy little *mudblood*.”

She stood up and grabbed her wand from her robes and aimed. Hermione was absolutely horrified then, it must have showed in her face because Greengrass began to laugh hysterically again.

She looked like a raving lunatic.

“Well, when you’re gone they’ll forget about you eventually, won’t they? Won’t they?” she said, excitedly. She had a positively deranged look on her pretty face now. It reminded Hermione painfully of Lavender Brown. ‘They won’t miss you. And then they... they’ll love me.’ She laughed maniacally again, clutching her head. “They’ll love me! Not a piece of mudblood scum! ME! THEY’LL LOVE ME!”

She raised her wand at Hermione who could do nothing but shut her eyes tight and brace herself for the impact. “*Confring*—”

“*Crucio*.”

An earsplitting scream left Astoria’s lips as she writhed and convulsed on the ground. Hermione panted, scared stiff, confused at the turn of events. She gaped a few more minutes at Greengrass before her brain finally registered what had happened.

Oh no.

She felt the familiar cold emptiness inside her again. This situation would not be looking good for Astoria.

“Draco, stop!” Hermione shouted.

She tried to lift herself up again, *desperately*. She had to help Astoria, who was still screaming at the top of her lungs and rolling on the ground in misery, out of her line of vision.

Then the whole cave turned silent, as if she had temporarily gone deaf. She heard nothing, save for Astoria’s ragged breaths.

Draco’s tall frame appeared before Hermione seconds later, his eyebrow raised. He stood above Hermione, who was still dangling off the edge. His handsome face was masked with impassiveness again but Hermione could tell he was angry.

“She tried to kill you.”

There was a dark promise lingering in his stony greys, a malevolence that told her he was about to do something extremely unpleasant.

She shuddered.

Something similar had happened before. Hermione remembered the night in the Restricted Section with three particular Slytherins who had tried to hurt her with the curses from a dark book and how Draco had reacted violently when he had found out. They had died a couple of weeks later. Now she doubted if Lavender Brown really had been responsible for their deaths.

“No, she didn’t!” she lied. “My Magical Concealment charm collap—”

“Because she tampered with it,” he interrupted in a harsh tone.

Hermione gaped at him in confusion. He clucked his tongue at her and made no move to help her up.

“She lifted it off?” she asked incredulously. “Why that bint—”

The screams behind him started again, rich timbres flooding her ears. For a split second, Hermione wanted it to continue. *Let her suffer for trying to kill me. She deserves it. She—*

“ENOUGH!” Hermione shouted. She mustn’t let her hatred control her mind. Revenge was never the answer. She mustn’t think like this. She mustn’t think like *him*. “Just—just stop!”

He continued to stare at her with a blank expression.

“D-don’t s-save her!” Greengrass yelled, despite still being under the Cruciatu Curse. “D-don’t you realize she’s a m-mudblood? She’s staining our—”

“Do you really think it wise to insult *my wife* in my presence?” he mocked, his voice dripping with venom.

“W-wife?” she growled, her face draining of all color. If possible, she looked even more deranged. “Y-you m-married *her*? ”

Astoria screamed louder, along with Draco’s cold, humorless laughter. Hermione was certain her ears were bleeding now. Draco showed no signs of stopping.

It was absolutely terrifying.

“Draco,” Hermione tried again, her voice shaking. She pushed away all thoughts of Astoria finding out about their marriage. She could deal with that later; right now she had to save her from Draco’s wrath. “Don’t do this. She doesn’t mean any—”

“Don’t make excuses for her dearest,” he said in a deceptively *calm* tone, but Hermione knew better. His menacing eyes scared the shit out of her.

“Draco, please.”

“No,” he said condescendingly.

“Draco—”

He growled in frustration.

He lifted the curse off again, but Hermione could tell he wasn’t satisfied at all. She gulped when she saw his wand hand twitch ever so slightly. He was undoubtedly trying to control his anger. He stared at Astoria with deep loathing and fury, causing the girl to cower in fear.

He was speaking to Astoria again but Hermione hardly heard it, she felt herself start to slip. She groaned in pain as her palms were chafed against the jagged rocks.

“Always so vulnerable,” Draco said, turning his attention back to Hermione’s now descending form. Finally, he pulled her up to safety, as if her weight were nothing. She landed on her hands and knees and sighed deeply in relief, taking a few more minutes to catch her breath.

She had never been so happy to see solid ground.

“Look at this, you’re allowing your enemies to hurt you.” He grabbed her roughly towards him, examining her bloodied palms in clear disapproval. He carried her in his arms before she could even protest.

“Put me down!” She struggled in his hold but he was much too strong. “It’s not like I had a choice!”

His grip tightened, crushing her soundly against his solid chest.

“Pull away from me and I’ll kill her.”

He nudged his head towards Astoria, silently *daring* Hermione to continue struggling.

He said it so nonchalantly, as if he were only joking.

But she knew he was dead serious, without a doubt. Hermione stopped squirming and snapped her mouth shut. This seemed to help lessen his rage and he smirked.

Hermione huffed in indignation, her face flushing red. Her gaze fell on Astoria, who was now frozen still on the ground.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

The girl was too scared out of her wits to even reply, but thankfully she seemed like she’d be fine.

Hermione glared at Draco. “I can’t believe you just used an Unforgiv—”

His lips crashed into hers before she could finish and she stiffened immediately. “Hermione,” he whispered so faintly, she almost didn’t hear him. Hermione felt her stomach flutter at his awkward closeness. “Wasn’t there something you wanted to tell me?” His intoxicating scent flooded her senses, soft feathered breaths against her skin...

“Huh?” she whispered, in a daze, feeling the sudden need to taste him again.

“I just saved your life, love.”

Oh.

Realization dawned on her and she felt her face heat up in embarrassment. Grudgingly, she muttered something that sounded like, “Thanks,” under her breath.

“Good girl.”

UGH. He had saved her life, *again!* She felt like a dreadful damsel-in-distress, always getting herself into trouble and always needing someone to save her freaking arse *every single time*. It was pathetic. Sweet Godric, why did this always have to happen to her?

She buried her face in his chest and groaned in frustration.

Consequently, Hermione never noticed him hiding her wand in his robes, nor did she notice the red flash from Draco’s wand that blasted Astoria Greengrass off the edge of the safety ward and *into the pit of leeches*.

His smirk widened in satisfaction.

Astoria's terrified screams resounded once more, like music to his ears. Finally, he was contented.

He continued to walk pleasantly with Hermione's delicate form in his arms, ignoring her useless struggles and shouts to save the poor girl who was now drowning in a sea of leeches...

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

He really is cruel :O

I actually feel sorry for Astoria now... tsk2.

Atmosphere shifting — caused by ones magic. Every wizard and witch has a unique magical energy, like fingerprints. :)

Magical Concealment charm — Invented. Spell that conceals magic and magical energy temporarily.

Morning Glory — a flower that lives off of the sun.

Pag-asa — means hope in Filipino.

Oi! YOU THERE! REVIEW!

I hope I hear from you :)

Chapter 8

Yes, I do have a Facebook, but I don't want to post it here... Here's my tumblr though: [lipsticksmiles\[dot\]tumblr\[dot\]com](http://lipsticksmiles.tumblr.com). Be warned, my blog is really boring...

I have the most amazing readers and reviewers. I read all your reviews and I love them all.

I'm terribly sorry for the very, very slow update. Like I said in my update area, I had Finals for 2 weeks. And then another 1 week for the after-final parties. So yeah I spent another week partying and drinking like there's no tomorrow. My friends told me I write better when I'm wasted...

Many, many thanks to my lovely beta Pooja ([murtagh799](http://murtagh799.tumblr.com)). She's just amazing. Drop by her page and send her my love :D

And NO, I will not give up on this story. I already have an ending! It'd be a shame to discontinue!

Thanks to my sister who gave me the idea for this chapter. This is the longest so far, 15 fucking pages, 6000+ characters. Bloody hell :))

btw, first sentence comes from Sylvia Plath's novel, "The Bell Jar." I'm reading it right now. It's a good read, yeah? Go on! Try it! :)

Here we go...

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

I felt very still and empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo.

She remembered the words so clearly, chanting them in the dull silence of her thoughts. That was precisely how she felt as she stood at the center of the lobby filled with boisterous people talking about the unfortunate accident. They murmured mixed words: some of comfort, some of pity, mostly of blame. They openly stared at her, wondering—*always* wondering. That's just human nature, she supposed. All these looks and whispers, she was used to them by now and it was always best to just ignore them.

Her mind was far too vacant, her eyes too bleak.

It was too quiet, not because the world around her had suddenly lost its voice and pressed its lips shut. It was because of the walls shielding her from everything else, rejecting all senses and experience, forcing her not to listen. In a way, she understood why Draco had allowed himself to be so indifferent for so long.

She could learn to get used to this—the numbness, the *peace*.

She thought of heading home, craved it even, anything to move away from the raging storm around her. Grudgingly, she headed towards the vault-like door of the underground passage for the second time that day, eyes red and tired, hair sticking out in all places. She shoved a baffled Auror who was blocking her way, ignored him when he started to say she wasn't allowed in.

The small safety point was currently off limits to the Unexhibitables, but she could care less. She needed to get something off her chest. She found a few people investigating the crime scene rather meticulously. Her gaze fell steadily on a man who was squatting near the edge, staring below. She'd recognize that ruffled jet black hair anywhere.

"Harry," she said quietly.

He made no move to acknowledge her presence and continued to stare down the pit, running his hands through his hair and shaking his head. "Nasty little things," she heard him mutter.

She felt sick on her stomach as thoughts of Astoria being devoured by leeches popped into her mind.

"Is—is she alright?"

"She's fine... She lost a lot of blood, but she's fine." He shifted his gaze to the blue and purple flower in the middle of the pit, still planted atop a tall pile of earth and rocks. "I told you to go home, Hermione. You should rest."

"I'm not going to go home until you hear what I have to say."

"Come off it," he said, waving his hand, as if to dismiss her. "You're just going to blame yourself ag—"

"Well it is my fault, isn't it?" she said irritably.

"For fuck's sake—" Harry finally stood, dusting off his robes and sauntering towards her.

"Oh, don't lie, Harry," she said impatiently. "I know it's my fault and I know you think so too. I shouldn't have let my guard down when *he* was around. And don't you try sugar-coating it just because I'm your best mate."

"You couldn't have saved her even if you tried, Hermione."

"Excuse me?" she drawled, feeling insulted.

"What would you have done?" he said, while gesturing to the pit angrily with his hand. "Climb down the bottom of this hell hole and haul her up with your superhuman strength? Pray that the leeches would let you pass untouched? We couldn't even get her out fast enough. What makes you think you could have done any better?"

"Haul her up with my—?" she said incredulously. "What?"

Harry gave her a weird look.

Hermione blinked several times and felt the gears on her head turning. She suddenly realized that her magic would have been nullified inside the pit. "Of course!" she said

abruptly. “The plant noticed the shift in the atmosphere. It must’ve had the ability to create wards to block the magic out! How fascinating!”

“Plants can do that?” asked Harry, before he shrugged. “See I told you. You couldn’t have saved her on your own. It’s not your fault.”

Hermione looked away from him, still unconvinced. She could see Harry’s mouth curve into a frown from the corner of her eyes.

“He didn’t push her off, did he?” He questioned, hopeful.

“No. He was holding onto me when she fell.”

Harry furrowed his eyebrows, looking extremely disappointed.

“Listen,” he said. “They told me there was no sign that he was here at all.”

“What?” she said in disbelief. “But I was here! I saw him! Doesn’t that count as something?”

Harry shook his head. “No physical evidence—er—sorry.”

Hermione cursed under her breath and clenched a fistful of her robes in anger.

She vaguely remembered Draco carrying her back to the staircases to the lobby, taking his sweet, precious time, while Astoria screamed mercilessly behind them. She had struggled so much and had managed to bite his arm, sinking her teeth in his flesh as a growl escaped his lips. When she had finally gotten away from him, she’d hysterically ran to the lobby, screamed at everyone present and tried desperately to contact Harry.

But even though Harry had arrived five seconds after he had gotten her message, Draco was nowhere to be found.

Luckily, he’d left her wand on the ground. Godric knows what would’ve happened if he took it with him.

“But that’s not to say I don’t believe you,” Harry said, trying to sympathize with her. “I do... It’s just that, I doubt that they will.”

Of course they won’t.

“Because he’s always so bloody thorough with his crimes,” she muttered to herself, seething quietly. She was breathing heavily, she realized, out of anger or exhaustion. Or maybe both.

“I know that look, Hermione,” said Harry, while frowning at her again. “Remember you still need to finish the potion. It’s your number one priority right now. You’ve worked too hard for this. Let me handle Malfoy.”

Her head snapped up to look at him indignantly, pissed at the idea of not being allowed to get revenge. Harry sighed deeply.

“You know, I—er— dreamt of—of Ron—last night.” He paused and shivered a little. It probably hadn’t been a very good dream, then. “Thought it must’ve been a bad sign... and

then when you called I forgot everything else and went to you. I was scared, Hermione. I thought—”

She stared at the ceiling and tried her best to keep the tears from spilling out. *Ron. Oh God.*

“I know it’s wrong, but I’m glad it wasn’t you. I’m glad you’re safe.”

Inhaling deeply, she tried to compose herself. She had yet to tell him what had really happened. She dragged him outside, quickly, away from prying eyes. And then she told him every single detail she could remember. Harry listened carefully, his face growing redder as she continued. By the time she had finished, Harry’s face was as red as Ginny’s hair.

“Bloody hell Hermione!” he exclaimed loudly, catching her off guard. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her angrily, as if he was trying to slap some sense into her. “Did it ever occur to you how extremely dangerous that flower is? Did you even pause to consider that maybe—you were endangering your arse by coming here with *Astoria bloody Greengrass?* What the fuck is wrong with you?”

She glared at the Aurors who were peeping through the vault-like doors, rattled by Harry’s loud voice.

“What are you staring at?” she snapped at them.

They jumped and quickly walked back inside.

“It’s part of being an Unexhibitible Harry,” she said icily.

Harry rolled his eyes.

“You could’ve at least ask for a different—”

“I didn’t have a choice!” she hissed angrily. “She was assigned to me—Madam Dumass said—”

“Oh yes, because you *always* obey what Madam Dumb-ass says,” Harry bit back in a sarcastic tone. “Like the time you read the Library books on the third floor, when she’d told you not to—or the time you refused to do an interview for the Daily Prophet, when she’d told you to— And let’s not forget that time when you proposed a project to make the Denovorum, when all she’d asked of you was a simple truth serum! Right Hermione. Really obedient, you are.”

“Oh please, this is an entirely different ordeal, Harry. This is *for* the *Denovorum* for Merlin’s sake, not some petty chore!” she defended. “Besides she didn’t know Astoria was unstable and neither did I!”

Harry’s temper rose from the surface, rearing its ugly head, but Hermione was just too upset to even bother to calm him down.

“Yeah? Well you could have been more alert, couldn’t you?” he said loudly, not caring anymore if the others heard or not. “You know how much she hates you. You’ve seen how it is! You think these people—Malfoy, Greengrass—you think they just want to have tea and *sing songs* with you? You’re out of your mind! Whatever happened to Constant Vigilance? I

suppose you think it's *alright* to just risk your life like it's rubbish—" he mocked, "—You're not even remotely considering the feelings of the rest of us who care about your well being!"

"Wh-what?" Hermione said, looking as though Harry had slapped her *hard*. She felt herself shaking violently in frustration, felt her nails digging into her flesh as she balled her fists. 'You think I *wanted* this to happen? YOU THINK I DON'T CARE? Who was I to know she was a—a deranged lunatic? I'm not like *you* Harry! CONSTANT VIGILANCE ISN'T EASY FOR ME!' she screamed, unaware of the tears leaking out her eyes. "I'M NOT BLOODY PERFECT LIKE YOU!"

Before he could say anything else, she turned on her heel furiously and stormed off to the staircases, without another glance.

"DON'T YOU DARE GO LOOKING FOR MALFOY!" she heard him shout in equal fury.

She rushed to the lobby, ignoring the weird looks everyone gave her as she went. She headed to the third floor while wiping her eyes furiously with the hem of her sleeve. His words hurt because they were true. She had been too weak and helpless. She had allowed herself to be frightened and vulnerable, letting them have the upper hand while they used it to their advantage.

Enough of this!

She truly felt like she was standing below the grey eyes of a storm, safe and unharmed, while everyone else suffered his harsh winds and relentless downpour. Well, she just wasn't going to allow it anymore. Too long had she sat around and watched pathetically as he took control of everything around her life like a puppet master tugging her strings.

She would be damned if she let him get what he wanted again.

The numerous chairs that lined the long, polished table of the Malfoy Manor dining hall were currently occupied by twenty or so people. Hooded cloaks hung on their heads and white masks covered their identities. They were arguing with each other, raised voices resounding off the walls.

"—chair is not to be seated on. The Dark Lord specifically ordered—"

"It's been 6 years," hissed a man. "Surely, whatever spell he cast has worn off by now?"

"Highly unlikely, Langdon, the Dark Lord informed me that the head chair determines the one who is worthy, his chosen heir."

The man called Langdon stood from his seat in an exaggerated manner, catching everyone's attention. He headed towards the head chair with an air of confidence. "Well then let's not waste time, shall we? We all know it is me." He sat on the chair with a dramatic air, enjoying the astounded stares he received from everyone.

The death eaters watched in silence.

His hand started to wrinkle and dry and turn into a horrid muddy color. It started with his fingers, but it quickly spread to his arms and neck in an unforgiving speed. It dissolved his jaws and gouged his eyes right out of his skull. He was soon screaming in pain, screaming for help, but his fellow death eaters did nothing as the rest of him withered and dropped dead.

It took a while before they realized his body had *decayed*... putrefied before their very eyes.

“Fool,” whispered one of them.

They remained quiet for the next couple of minutes, still startled by the gruesome display.

The faintest sound of soft chuckles broke the awkward silence; it was a cruel, malignant hum, one that sent shivers down their spines. They turned their heads to the lone figure standing on the doorway, wearing a crisp black suit and looking impeccable as always, hands in his pockets.

He didn't even bother to wear a mask.

“Ah, finally,” said one of the masked Death Eaters. “After five years in hiding, Draco Malfoy finally decides to show himself. Tell us... Are you so daft that you've forgotten something so simple as manners and punctuality?”

“I had business to attend to, Dewhurst,” Draco said while smirking. ‘Although I am glad I got to witness that rather *wonderful* display of genuine stupidity.’ He sniggered and checked his pocket watch. “I'm glad I finished my meeting with the Minister earlier than expected.”

“And what is this meeting all about? Don't tell me you're begging for a job there now?” growled Rowle, from the right side of the dinner table. “Or is this about your darling, mudblood wife?”

A few death eaters howled in laughter. Others hissed in displeasure, shaking their heads.

Draco's face remained impassive. Aside from the slight twitch on his left eye, nothing else marred his handsome features.

“On the contrary,” he said nonchalantly. He sauntered forward, perfectly calm and composed in each stride. “It was actually the Minister that did the begging, not I... You see, they requested me to help make the antidote for those—poor—helpless—*pathetic*—” He paused behind Rowle's chair, felt the man stiffen at his proximity. “—*scums* affected by Lycanthropy.”

“Really now?” said MacNair with a tone of amusement.

“Yes, really,” Draco said quite casually, but Rowle, who was near enough, didn't fail to hear the hint of malice in his otherwise calm voice. “I don't need the money, of course. I'm already rich enough as it is. No, this particular job was a—what was the phrase again? Oh yes —*a chance to redeem myself*. I've done so much for them that the public trusts me now. They're convinced that I am... *reformed*.”

The man called MacNair chuckled.

“Oh, the wonders of the infamous Malfoy charm,” he said. “They did not suspect?”

Draco continued striding to the fore, the sound of his footsteps echoing faintly as he went. “They most certainly did, but what choice did they have? I was always best at potions, you see.”

He finally reached the Head chair, kicking Langdon’s dead, rotten corpse out of his way and clucking his tongue.

He eyed the crowd once more with a small smirk on his face and traced the back of the Head chair with his long fingers.

“Anyone else who thinks they’re worthy? Hmm?” he offered. They cowered in their seats. Not one of them was arrogant enough to move a muscle, too horrified by the events that had transpired just a while ago. “No?”

Draco sat on the head chair and placed his elbows on the table, resting his chin on his interlaced fingers.

The silence stretched perpetually.

They expected him to have suffered the same fate as Langdon had but he remained breathing.

Draco’s smirk widened at their fear.

“*You?*” said Travers, disbelief gripping his voice. Draco heard them murmur amongst each other in protest. “You are the Dark Lord’s chosen heir?”

“How could you marry a mudblood?” Dewhurst said, outraged, banging her palms on the table and standing up. “This is a disgrace—an—an insult to the Dark Lord!”

Draco leaned back on the Head chair carelessly and shrugged. “He’s dead.”

Dewhurst’s wand was out in a flash, aimed dangerously at his head, but before she even got a chance to cast a spell, Draco’s curse had blasted her to the wall. The impact of the spell caused her to lose consciousness.

Another flick of his wrist and Rowle fell from his chair, convulsing and screaming on the ground.

“Never insult my darling, mudblood wife again,” he said dangerously in a soft voice.

“I-It w-won’t h-happen again, my Lord!” screamed Rowle.

He didn’t lift the curse off, just silenced him with another spell. He felt everyone stiffen in their seats, uncomfortable with what they had just heard; uncomfortable with what Rowle had easily addressed him.

He had always been blessed with a skill to manipulate everyone around him. It was a talent he had used to his advantage countless of times. And the truth of it was, they had suspected it was him. Probably had known from the very beginning. They had seen the signs, noticed the amount of time he’d been spending with Voldemort, noticed how he had gotten stronger, much stronger than the rest of them. And now their suspicions had been confirmed as they looked at the young man sprawled luxuriously over the head chair, looking irritated and bored

out of his mind. He had earned the title they had all dreamed of, and yet he looked as if he didn't care for it at all.

"Anyone else wish to defy me?" Draco asked in boredom, examining his nails. He patiently waited for them to say something, but no one dared. "I thought so."

His eyes were on them again, eyes that seemed to devour them whole, eyes that seemed to engrave terror onto their very minds. Eyes that seemed almost similar to *his* red ones had it not been for its chilling shade of silver.

"There's a way to bring dear old Voldie back to life."

Murmurs of incredulity came from their mouths in an instant. Everyone knew a spell to bring back the dead was entirely impossible. Draco ignored them as they prattled amongst themselves, feeling the need to cut off their tongues. With a wave of his wand, he summoned a piece of parchment from his room. It unrolled before him, its length reaching the middle of the table, effectively silencing their childish ramblings.

A map.

"The secret lies in the Department of Magical Research and Development. The last floor."

The Third Level Library of the Department of Magical Research and Development was enormous. It was a large room that housed millions of books. She had been there only thrice in her existence. Twice due to Unexhibitible reasons; the last because of her own curiosity. Only a few people were ever allowed inside because this Library contained thousands of forbidden books concerning the Dark Arts.

Hermione smiled as she thought back to her years at Hogwarts. The third level library was sort of like the Restricted Section... only bigger... and far more dangerous.

She had used her Unexhibitible status as an excuse to enter, when in fact the real reason she was here was to research Marriage Bonds. She knew she had already read countless of books in attempt to learn how to break a traditional Marriage Bond despite being told by all her pureblood friends that there was no way out of it. But she couldn't help but remember a time when she had asked Madame Dumass about it.

"I'm afraid there is no legal way out of it, dearest," she said. "—unless you're willing to try the darker ways. Why do you want to know, Ms. Granger?"

"Oh nothing, Madame," she said, laughing nervously. "I was just curious. That's all."

She locked herself inside for a week, hardly eating anything and barely sleeping at all. But she didn't stop reading. She couldn't.

She had to end this.

She didn't need to turn around to know he was there.

The Malfoy Manor was a stunning place, the kind of house that rich people liked to brag about. Being there made her feel like she was in a palace of some sorts, surrounded by the most beautiful furniture and paintings and other expensive things.

Nothing had changed since she'd last seen it.

She found herself contemplating, eyes fixed on the dancing flames in the fireplace of the sitting room. The pity she felt at the pit of her heart made her want to burn the house to the ground. Draco had lived here all his life and it made her want to hold him. She couldn't picture a child staying here, *living* here, even if it was someone as evil as him. She wasn't blind to the splendors the Malfoy Manor beheld. It was huge and beautiful, but it was miserably cold too.

It had all the luxuries needed for a majestic house, but it lacked the warmth that was needed to build a home.

And she was hugging herself, as if doing so would protect her from the dark mood around her.

The atmosphere shifted into that familiar emptiness and intensity. She didn't have to look, she *felt* him standing a few feet behind her.

It was frightening to know how much he made her heart race just by his presence alone.

"Finally come to your senses love?" His voice sounded low and gruff.

She finally plucked up enough courage and faced him. Their eyes locked together, brown mixing with grey.

She let herself take in his exquisite form, his pale hair, pale skin, and pale grey eyes. He really was beautiful. She loved looking at his aristocratic features, the way they aligned themselves together in all perfection to assemble his handsome face. She adored everything, even the dark robes he wore. And she thought he looked like a fallen angel in the shadows, grand in all his beauty but broken all the same.

"Y-yes," she said quietly.

He took a step forward, making her jump back. She mentally slapped herself for showing even the slightest bit of fear. He took another step but she stood her ground this time.

"Really?" he chuckled in amusement. Hermione felt little beads of sweat on her forehead as he inched closer. "Why the sudden change of heart?"

She counted to ten and closed her eyes, allowing herself a moment's peace. She wouldn't succeed in the task at hand if she let everything about him distract her.

"I—you were—right," she stuttered weakly.

"You think so?" he asked. Despite her closed lids, she felt him circling around her form, like a predator observing his defenseless prey before an attack.

"Yes."

"Ah, there we are." She felt his breath on the back of her neck and she bit her lips to stop herself from whimpering. She wanted to move away from his closeness. He was fogging her

mind, preventing her from doing what she had to. “The feisty little Gryffindor I’m so very fond of. Back to being brave and noble again, are we?”

She felt him wrap his arms around her waist affectionately, felt him cage her from behind.

“Tell me you love me,” he whispered in her ear.

Hermione swallowed the dry lump in her throat. She couldn’t breathe properly. She was sure he was near enough to hear the loud pounding of her heart in her chest. She tried to grasp the words, tried to feel them in the tip of her tongue. Just three little words.

“I—I love you.”

She felt him inhaling deeply then, taking in her scent. They stayed like this for a long time as if he was treasuring the moment.

She struggled to move her wand hand that had been limp at her side. If she wanted to do this, now was the perfect time. But she couldn’t make her body move, couldn’t summon enough will to—

His sudden bark of cold laughter made her jump.

He let go of her and shook his head. Then he sprawled lazily on the couch, crossing his ankle over his knees. Her hand itched to raise her wand and curse him with every bloody curse she could think of.

She had just *declared her love* to him, and this is how he reacted? How dare he—

“How is Astoria, Hermione?” he tauntingly asked, interrupting her train of thought. “I heard she didn’t die. Shame.”

“You’re a bastard, Malfoy,” she said, her voice dripping with venom.

“And you’re a *liar*,” he drawled menacingly.

His face darkened. Hermione had to stop herself from turning away from his condescending eyes. It took all the willpower she had not leave this place and never look back. His words riddled her mind.

“You think I’m going to buy this? You think I’m going to believe the pathetic shit you throw at me?”

He laughed again, but this one was different from his mocking laugh. This laugh was bitter, so bitter she could almost vomit at the taste of it. Hermione knew she had hurt him. She had hurt him *terribly*.

“I guess that damned hat sorted you into the wrong house, hmm?” he said coldly. “You’re more Slytherin than you let on! I should have known you would try to do something as drastic as this. But I didn’t think you would be so conniving— *lying* to me and distracting me with your rubbish.”

So he figured it out?

She aimed her wand determinedly at him.

“I have to do this,” she said boldly, trying her best to hide the shakiness of her voice. “It’s the only way!”

“Go ahead, then. Do it, Hermione!” he yelled, spreading his arms wide, tempting her to attack.

Hermione’s mind went blank. She felt her hand trembling—no—she felt her whole body trembling violently. She had always prided herself for being the smart one, the one who always used her brains and never let her emotions cloud her judgment. *She always knew what was right.*

A whole week of research had all led to this.

The only way to break a Traditional Pureblood Marriage Bond was through death.

She had considered it countless of times, so many times that she was sure she’d lose her sanity. This past week, she hadn’t been able to sleep or eat, she could only think. All her days had been consumed by the thought of him, of killing him, and it just wasn’t fair. He was already controlling her life. It wasn’t fair that he was controlling her thoughts as well.

He wouldn’t let her escape him. And by now she wasn’t so sure she wanted to escape him either. She might have said things to distract him a while ago, but she had told the truth.

She hadn’t lied... not at all.

As sick and disturbing as it sounded... Hermione Granger had fallen in love with a murderer. And she couldn’t let it go on.

“What are you waiting for, dearest? Do it!” he encouraged her, mockingly.

Was this right?

“Kill me.”

She was doing everyone justice by ending his life forever. He had stolen so many lives, robbed so many children of their mothers and fathers. He took relentlessly and greedily and she shouldn’t allow it anymore.

Draco Malfoy was a thief in the night. He needed to pay for everything he had done.

Her mind drifted back to Grindelwald and his thirst for power. It was for the greater good, he had said. He had dedicated his life to ridding the world of half bloods and muggle borns alike because they tainted the very purity he prided himself with.

Was she doing the same?

Was she doing this for the greater good too?

Draco waited patiently as Hermione battled with her inner demons, struggling so hard. He felt a wave of pity inside of him. She was clearly suffering and he just wanted to hold her. He could see how tired she was. He noticed the droplets of tears cascading down her cheeks. She was looking at him blankly as he sat on the couch, but he knew she couldn’t really see him at all.

Finally, with a slight hesitation, she lowered her wand.

And then she collapsed to the floor and sobbed hysterically, wrapping her arms around herself and rocking back and forth.

“I—I can’t...” she kept repeating. “I—I c-can’t k-kill you.”

I know, love, I know.

Hermione couldn’t stop sobbing. She felt so disgusted with herself for breaking down in front of him. She felt so helpless. She knew she shouldn’t be so vulnerable but she couldn’t help the despair.

She felt him walk towards her cautiously, as if not to frighten her. And then he used his strong hands to carry her to the couch. He sat her on his lap and pulled her towards him, wrapping his arms around her securely and running his hands through her hair. It was so comforting; she couldn’t help but lean on his chest. She loved the sound of his voice as he muttered soothing words into her ear.

She let pleasurable sensations overwhelm her when he pressed his lips on hers, and pretty soon she found he was kissing her again.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered faintly.

A part of her was screaming at her, warning her of the relentless control he had over her every time she lost herself in his kisses, but she couldn’t seem to hear them. She was drowning in him, choking on his tight hold, and yet she felt so secure, so safe.

Oh, the irony.

It scared her how badly she wanted to kiss him too. She wanted to lock her arms around his shoulders and drink from his lips. Suddenly, she didn’t care if she was drowning. Not anymore. She was too *exhausted*. She offered no resistance when he pulled her closer to him or when she felt his tongue lick the sensitive part of her neck. She couldn’t think. She didn’t want to think.

All she wanted was him.

Draco found his way into her mouth again, forcefully invaded her with his tongue before she could protest. This time, she finally kissed him back. He smiled against her lips. Merlin, she tasted good. Kissing her was his temporary high, something that satisfied and elevated him. It was better than having sex with countless faceless girls he had been with. He wondered what it would feel like to be inside her.

He brushed the curve of her breast with his hand and did it again and again, until he heard her moan in pleasure. He unbuttoned her blouse, desperate to remove the thin fabric that was covering her skin. His hand slid into her thigh, hiking her skirt higher and higher.

Until Hermione wrenched her lips away from his and jumped off his lap. He groaned in annoyance. Before he could grab her again, however, she had already walked a safe distance away from him.

She was staring at him with wide eyes, panting heavily. Unconsciously, she traced her lips with her fingers. He saw the defeat etched on her pretty face. Sighing deeply, she turned away from him and headed towards the fireplace.

“Where are you going?” he asked irritably. “Stay,” he demanded.

She kept walking, deliberately ignoring him. Draco felt his blood boil in anger. *The nerve of this girl!*

“You know, I was at St. Mungo’s a couple of days ago.”

She stopped in her tracks.

“I was making antidotes for Lycanthropy,” he continued. “—on the fourth floor.”

The alarm bells in Hermione’s head started ringing madly. Draco had done something again. She didn’t miss it: the underlying tone of malice in his voice. To a stranger it sounded perfectly normal and harmless, to her however, it sounded the way it was supposed to sound —a warning— like dark clouds that informed her of an upcoming storm.

“What did you do, Draco?” she said, facing him again.

His lips curled into another malignant sneer.

“Why I cured them all of course,” he assured her; at least that was what it looked like. “I’m surprised those pathetic healers don’t know how to do it. It was easy.”

Hermione didn’t buy it, not for a second.

“The Ministry will know you did it,” Hermione said firmly. “Whatever you’re planning it’ll be traced back to you. You gave them the antidote, you’re to blame.”

He snorted.

“Who said anything about the antidote being poisoned?” he retorted. “Don’t take me for a thick moron, Princess. I’m not Potter.”

Hermione gritted her teeth, resisting the urge to wrap her hands on his neck and strangle him with every fiber of her being. So he didn’t poison the antidote. What was it then? What had he done?

“Enough games, Draco!” she shouted in annoyance. “Tell me what you did!”

He smirked again. It was one of his more disturbing smiles but Hermione refused to be intimidated.

“Nothing really,” he said, boring his eyes on her. “Unless...”

“Unless?”

“Unless you count the fire whiskey they had drank hours ago, to celebrate their permanent recovery.”

Fire whiskey?

“Come on, Princess, think,” he said. “What’s the main ingredient for Lycanthropy antidote?”

Alcohol reacted with the main ingredient used in Lycanthropy antidote. This type of magical reaction causes heat. They would *melt..*

“Oh *Godric*,” she said in horror.

“They only have thirty minutes left,” he said unfeelingly. “Now, you can either try to whip up the potion that removes alcohol from the body...”

Hermione didn’t like the idea. The potion was hard to make. Even if she could whip up the potion in time, she wasn’t sure if it would be effective.

She couldn’t take that risk.

“...or I could just give you the potion myself. I have one here somewhere,” he said happily. He looked like he was clearly enjoying her discomfort. “In return, though, you have to stay here with me.”

This was what he had been planning all along. She clenched her fists tightly.

“What will it be, Princess? Save them, or save yourself?”

“Both,” she said determinedly, turning her back on him and heading towards the fireplace again. She heard him chuckle behind her.

“You’re going to make the potion? What happens if you fail, Hermione?” he asked her in a sickeningly sweet voice. “Would you be able to live with yourself, knowing it was your own selfishness that caused their deaths?”

Draco knew her too well. He knew she was blaming herself for everyone’s death. He knew how much her guilt was eating her alive. He always knew the right words, always knew how to get to her.

She ignored him and flooed to St. Mungo’s, not wanting to hear anything more. She was going to make that antidote if it killed her, and then she was going to come back and shove it in his face. He was underestimating her. She was not an Unexhibitible for nothing.

Draco smirked and sprawled lazily on the couch again, waiting. She was going to *break*; it was only a matter of time. In her current state of mind, he doubted she would succeed. This little episode was proof of that.

She was slowly *slipping*. Now all he had to do was catch.

“You brought this upon yourself, Princess,” he said darkly, clucking his tongue. “You just *had* to do this the hard way.”

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Lycanthropy — is the ability or power of a human being to undergo transformation into a wolf. There is obviously no Lycanthropy antidote in canon, or else Lupin would’ve already been cured. I added it here because I felt like it. :))

This is the part where I’m supposed to bore you with my sentences but I’m too brain dead to do that now. Maybe next chapter :p It’s summer time in the Philippines already and we’re on summer break. I hope I can update faster.

Tell me what you think :) Reviews encourage me to write more.

I LOVE YOU GUYS. PEACE OUT.

Chapter 9

There will be many errors on this chap, because I did *a lot* of rewriting after it was beta-ed. I was supposed to publish last Monday, but my beta told me it was a bit lacking. So I read it again, and lo and behold, she was right. It was painful to read. *face-palm* So I had to write it again. This is the best I could come up with in my zombie state. TSK TSK.

Thanks to my beta, Pooja (murtagh799), who took the time to beta and give me notes even if she had exams. Isn't she great? :D Wish her luck on her exams! \:D/

And thanks to my readers and reviewers! You guys are awesome. Someone craved pizza, so I made pizza. I poured my heart and soul in there too. I even added a secret ingredient. *cough*chocolate syrup*cough* I hope you like it :D

Listen to this, Criminal by Britney Spears. Someone told me the lyrics reminded her of HSDS. hahaha

I have no valid excuse for updating late, except my extreme laziness and lack of inspirations. It happens every once in a while. It's just hard to gather my thoughts when they're all over the place. Forgive me.

Anyways, read away :)

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

We loved with a love that was more than love . -Edgar Allan Poe

From the outside the tower was a very tall pile of black bricks neatly attached together in a spherical formation. It was well spotted as the tallest building in this particular part of town. It gave the impression that the owner was an extremely affluent person and no one was worthy of his or her time.

Unlike the other shops, it displayed no signs in front, no words indicating its name to the people passing by. They did not need it. There was only a huge symbol above the heavy doors: an emblem bearing the colours black, green and silver, in addition to intricate serpentine creatures. And if a wandering person ever stopped to observe, he would read the bold Latin words “*Sanctimonia Vincet Semper.*” One look on this symbol and the people would already know the name of the tower.

Every wizard and witch in the Wizarding world was familiar with the Malfoy Family Crest.

Hermione Granger stared up at the said crest above her and uneasily tugged the long sleeve of her shirt till it covered the same crest engraved in her arm. She considered retreating towards the safety of her flat and never coming back. It was the first time she had ever set foot in this unknown territory. She was scared, to say the least. And the dark aura surrounding the outskirts did nothing to make her feel better.

This time was most certainly going to be her last, she promised herself this.

Taking in deep, calming breaths, she pushed all her fears aside. She raised her chin and walked confidently towards the double doors.

The Malfoy Tower, like every other bloody thing the Malfoy family owned, displayed grand extravagance in every way. You would think that successful businesses in the Wizarding world would resemble one of the simple, well-known shops, like Honeydukes or the Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, perhaps. But of course, the Malfoys had to be the best in everything. They wanted something bigger, more distinct, and more uncommon. Forget the shop idea, we're rich enough, let's build a bloody tower!

Bastards.

As soon as she was inside, she pretended to know exactly where she was going. She avoided looking at people in the eyes. She entered one of the lifts and pressed the button to the highest floor. She hadn't known if it was the right floor but usually the boss was on the highest floor, right?

Hermione had never really given that much thought to Malfoy's inheritance. She'd only had a vague idea about the Malfoy business; that they owned shops and hotel chains and enormous lands all over the world.

As she waited on the lift, she wondered how much easier it would have been for her if she was happily married to him and she had all this money at her disposal. She would easily be able to do all the projects she wanted for the sake of those in need. She could have funds for her programs for muggleborn rights, squib rights and elf rights. She could accomplish a lot of things and make a huge difference.

But then she remembered how devious Draco was and almost immediately she pushed all previous thoughts aside, disgusted with herself for even thinking of staying with him for his money. Draco Malfoy was an evil dictator. He would step on anyone to get what he wanted, while being admired and worshipped by everyone in the process. She guessed it was only right that he had been housed with the snakes; he was the staggering epitome of one, a charmer, slowly mesmerizing you to your death.

Finally, the lift had stopped and she stepped out. She couldn't find anyone on this floor and it made her trespassing a whole lot easier. She didn't want to stop and observe the creepiness of her surroundings, despite her nagging curiosity. It might've had traps of some sorts. *All evil lairs had hidden traps, right?*

When she found a big, expensive looking door at the end of the hall, Hermione knew she'd been right. As she neared it, she instantly felt her anger crawling up her skin again. She ignored his assistant who asked her if she had an appointment and entered his office with a loud bang on the door.

Draco's office reminded her of Professor Snape's back when she was at Hogwarts. There were a lot of unusual items around, some of which she couldn't even identify.

Draco had been talking to an old man in a black pin-striped suit before she had barged in unexpectedly.

His assistant had rushed in after her.

“Lord Malfoy! I’m sorry she just came in withou—”

“She can stay.”

Hermione stomped towards his desk and slammed a glass vial in front of his seated form, carelessly ignoring the few things that had toppled over his desk during her not-so-warm greeting. He looked calculatingly at the vial for a short while, frowned, and then turned to the old man with an amused look on his face.

“Old man,” he said as he stood from his seat and walked calmly towards Hermione. She hadn’t had time to pull away when he suddenly gave her a small peck on the lips. “Here she is.”

Hermione gave him a confused, irritated glance but he paid her no attention. Instead, he wrapped an arm around her waist tightly, so she couldn’t pull away despite her best efforts.

“Well that explains it,” the old man said, while smiling at the two of them. “Ah, young love. Bit of a quarrel, you two?”

“Yes, we had a slight disagreement the other day, didn’t we, love?” he told Hermione fondly, who could do nothing but glare at him. “Something about drinking Fire whiskey, I believe? Yes, Lucy?”

He had addressed this to his assistant... secretary or whatever, who was still standing at the doorway, gawking at Hermione. The woman snapped out of her thoughts and muttered an apology before heading out.

“Peter Van Bonham,” said the old man as he offered his hand to Hermione.

Hermione’s jaw dropped. She had heard this name before, of course. This man was one of the smartest people in all Britain! He was the owner of St. Mungo’s Hospital!

She suddenly felt stupid for rudely barging in.

Draco cleared his throat and she realized she was still gaping at him. She shut her mouth and nervously shook his outstretched hand.

“Mr. Bonham,” she stuttered, still staring at said man in awe. The man was a legend. She forgot her fury in a heartbeat. “Hermione, Hermione Granger.”

“Please, call me Pete,” he said with a soft chuckle. “No need for formalities, young lady. We’re all family here.”

“Heard that, darling?” Draco eyed her smugly. “We’re all *family*.”

She elbowed him hard on the stomach but he hardly even noticed.

“You’ll need compassion and love for that, *darling*,” she said in mock sweetness. “I guess that disqualifies you.”

Pete laughed again and stared at her rather fondly. “You were right, my boy! She’s a feisty one! Perfect woman to put you in your place, you arrogant bastard!”

“Not only that, old man. She’s an unexhibitible as well,” Draco said with what sounded like a tinge of pride in his voice.

“Why that’s brilliant,” Pete told her, looking genuinely impressed. She blushed furiously and stared at the floor. “Oh yes, I remember now! You’re working on the Denovorum, aren’t you?”

Despite her nervousness, she managed to give a stiff nod.

“You’ve got yourself quite a girl there, son,” he told Draco. “Humble, beautiful, feisty and smart. I hope you invite me to your wedding.”

Hermione grimaced as Pete gave Draco a knowing wink.

Draco smirked and stared down at her charmingly. “We will, right Princess?”

Hermione suddenly felt as though there were little butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

She was supposed to be *angry* at him, not act like a love sick fool!

Pete finally stood from his seat and straightened his suit. “I’ll be going now. Leave you two lovers to talk and make up. Let’s continue our business deal over lunch tomorrow, eh? I’ll have my secretary owl you.”

Draco nodded and shook his hand.

“Nice meeting you, Miss Granger,” he smiled and left.

Hermione stared in space for a few more minutes, still processing her thoughts. She couldn’t believe she had just met *the* Peter Van Bonham. And he thought she was smart!

She could now die a happy woman.

Suddenly it was very quiet in the spacious office with just the two of them. Hermione felt the awkward tension and she remembered she was still in Malfoy’s office, *in his arms*. She wrenched herself away from him in embarrassment.

He was unfazed by all this. His eyes were focused on the glass vial on his desk. He had reached for it and proceeded to examine it carefully.

“You really did it...” he muttered more to himself, rather than at her.

“I got you, haven’t I?” she said loudly, remembering her purpose once again. “Must be frustrating to know your plans of imprisoning me in the Manor *aren’t working*.”

It had taken her 24 minutes and 3 seconds to create the potion that removed alcohol from the body, roughly 15 minutes and 53 seconds less than the actual time that was needed to complete such a complicated task. To her relief, she had managed to save everyone by sheer luck and a terrible amount of determination.

She had wanted to return to the Manor after that, so she could simply rub it in his annoyingly good-looking face. But she had been quite out of it by then, so she’d decided to come back some other day.

So now here she was, her hands on either side of her hips, gloating, but the arsehole didn’t even have the decency to look bothered.

“You were always too smart for your own good, Granger.” He sprawled back to his seat, grabbed a few scrolls of parchment and started reading them. “I wouldn’t make the mistake of

underestimating you again... like last time. There's *always* a plan B."

If possible, her anger heightened at his obvious indifference.

Hermione banged her palms on the desk, yanking the parchment out of his damned hands and tearing the infernally yellowed sheets until they were clearly too small to be torn. After which she threw the little pieces in front of his face (like confetti) and burned them mid-air with her wand. They turned to ash before they reached him.

He didn't even flinch.

"Just letting you know what will happen to your plan B," she said in annoyance.

"Is that right?" he sneered while leaning back in his chair and tilting his head slightly. "Then I should tell you—I expect dinner to be ready by seven."

For the love of—!

"Don't give people the wrong ideas, you git! I'm not your girlfriend!"

"Of course you aren't. You're my wife."

Hermione let out an exasperated scream and muttered curse words, before slamming the door of his office loud enough to be heard some ten miles away.

She didn't see the evil glint that passed his eyes as soon as she had left.

"Potter," he said with about as much as loathing as he had for Viktor Krum.

The boy-who-lived adjusted the rim of his glasses, ordered two drinks from the bartender that curiously had a 'beautifully' scarred face that would have given Mad-eye Moody a run for his money. When the drinks reached their table Potter immediately handed one to him. Draco stared suspiciously at the glass of cognac in front of him, and then he looked back at Potter.

"Malfoy," he replied with the exact same repulsed tone Draco had used.

"To what do I owe this —" His face twisted into disgust. "—pleasure?"

It really had come as a shock, being owled by Potter one day to ask him if they could meet at a pub in the darkest corners of Knockturn alley. Draco was bothered by the sheer audacity of the man, boldly stepping on enemy territory.

"I wanted to ask a few questions," said Potter casually.

"In an ex-convict pub in Knockturn alley?" He raised an eyebrow.

"I wanted to avoid the reporters," he said sheepishly.

Draco considered this for a moment. He supposed it was a reasonable answer. This particular pub was known to cater to ex-convicts of Azkaban. It was a basic rule here, a way of life, not to meddle with anyone's business.

Even if it was the great Harry Potter, apparently.

“Why did you ask us to keep quiet about your Marriage?”

Draco stared at Potter impassively, trying to analyze his hidden motives. Questions, he had said. He didn’t buy it. It was very uncharacteristic of Potter to suddenly invite him out just because he wanted to play the interested interviewer. This was an interrogation and Potter knew something he didn’t. So he decided to play along.

“Why wouldn’t I?” he asked, feigning confusion.

“Oh don’t play dumb, you prat. You know what I’m on about,” Potter glared at him. “If the Daily Prophet gets a hold of this, you could convince every bloke in Great Britain to side with you. You know all too well that tradition is not taken lightly in the Wizarding world. The only reason why Kingsley isn’t forcing Hermione to move with you is because I requested it.”

Draco traced his fingers lightly on the glass, taking in every word Potter was babbling out. He had known all this, of course. He hadn’t needed Potter to enlighten him. If everyone knew about the marriage, Kingsley would have no choice but to force Hermione to live in his Manor. It was simply *unacceptable* for bonded people to live in separate homes. The public wouldn’t give a rat’s arse about details. They’d overlook the fact that Hermione wanted nothing to do with him and all they’d see is the Malfoy Crest engraved in her delicate little arm.

He would’ve done it too, use the public to his advantage. It was the easiest and fastest way, after all. But he had stopped himself at the last minute.

“I really don’t know what you’re on about, Potter,” he lied, enjoying the annoyed look he was getting from Saint Potter.

“You’re not making this easy for me, Malfoy,” Potter eyed him wearily, taking a sip of cognac. “And it’s not poisoned. If I wanted to kill you, I would do something more painful. Yeah, sounds about right—slow and painful.”

Draco snorted haughtily but drank the cognac anyway. He felt his throat burn as he swallowed.

When he didn’t die, he stared at the boy-who-lived once more.

“If this got out, the Bulgarians would detest Granger for causing the death of the Krums, one of their most highly respected families. I know everyone knows it isn’t Granger’s fault, but these people, they just want someone to blame, Potter. They want closure and justice and the sort. I’m waiting until this whole fuss about the Krums dies down. Otherwise, the Bulgarian Ministry would have no choice but to demand Granger’s arrest and so on. You get the picture.”

He hadn’t known why he had just blurted out the truth at that moment. He stared suspiciously at the cognac and wondered if it contained a truth serum, even though he had seen the bartender making it a while ago.

He was just *that* paranoid around Potter.

“Yeah, I get it,” Potter said, staring at him as though he was looking for something in his eyes. It made Draco feel uneasy. “You’re doing this to protect Hermione.”

Draco almost spat the cognac that was still in his mouth at the statement but thankfully he managed to refrain. He sent a venomous glare at Potter, who chose to coolly ignore him.

“I have a proposition.”

He remained remarkably still, successfully hiding the anticipation he felt.

“I want you to lay off Hermione for about a month.”

As soon as the words reached his ears, a bark of laughter left Draco’s mouth.

“Really, Potter? Would you want a public annulment from me as well?” he said with a soft chuckle.

But the man was dead serious. He grabbed his wand and conjured a piece of parchment to appear before Draco.

“What is this?” He stared disdainfully at the parchment in front of him.

Potter forced a stiff, triumphant smile on his lips that made Draco shift uncomfortably in his seat. He decided that the man had changed terribly since he’d last saw him. Potter was no longer the unreasonable, foolish child who would do something as stupid as endangering his life due to emotional turmoil. None of that *leap before you think* bullshit anymore. Yes, Potter was still quite noble and a Gryffindor in every sense of the annoying word, but there was something new there, a sparkle in his eyes, something akin to Dumbledore’s blue ones, and yet so very, very different.

He read the piece of parchment and saw the written confession of one, Albert Harker, saying that it was Draco Malfoy who had suggested Fire whiskey for the celebration of the Lycanthropy cure.

Impressive.

“So what if I suggested it?” His tone sounded deceptively honest. “It doesn’t prove anything.”

Potter sighed.

“Do you really think Worden is going to let you get away with this again? The man hates your pureblood gut Malfoy. He won’t let you live through the day.”

He stared at Potter with an unreadable, expressionless face again. Sadly, Potter was right. The odds were against him.

He scowled in annoyance. *I should have killed Harker when I had the chance.*

“One week,” Draco stated flatly, boring his eyes into the man beside him.

“Three.”

He cursed under his breath and downed the entire glass of cognac. “Alright. *Fine.* Three weeks and then I have permission to have this thing burned and buried,” he said with a frustrated grunt. He drummed the table impatiently with his fingers and waited for Potter to speak again, but a couple of minutes passed and the man merely sat there, bloody *contemplating*.

“Is that *all*, Potter?” he snapped angrily.

Potter took another swig at his glass before setting it down the wooden table with a soft thud.

“Yes.”

Draco caught himself before he could let out a growl of disbelief. He had fully expected more blackmail, humiliation, one foul, disgusting kiss from a dementor... even banishment or excommunication... but this?

“What?” he said, as though his ears had somehow deceived him.

“You heard me,” Potter replied nonchalantly, not bothering to look at him at all.

“Yes, I heard you loud and clear, Potter. You’re letting a murderer with no conscience escape Azkaban without so much as a three week restraining order!” he spat harshly, causing several on goers to look at them.

“I wouldn’t really say you had no conscience—”

“*Let me guess*. You’ve had an epiphany of some sorts and thought that maybe, I’ll *repent* and we’ll all bake a cake made out of rainbows and live happily ever after. A little too Hufflepuff for someone like you, don’t you think?”

“Not really.”

“Not really?” he repeated incredulously. “Have you forgotten what I’ve done? How I killed a lot of innocent people because I could? How I forced Granger into marrying me? Or that I got away with all of this because I *outsmarted* you?”

Potter merely ran a hand through his hair and stubbornly ignored him again.

Draco banged his palms on the table, frustrated at Potter’s composed reaction. He didn’t understand this aloof shit Potter was throwing at him. He was so used to the Chosen One’s hostility and emotional outbursts.

“I murdered your best mate,” he drawled unfeelingly. Before he knew it, Potter was on his feet and his hand gripped Draco’s collar so tightly, he almost choked. His other hand held his wand which was now pressed painfully against Draco’s throat. His eyes were burning like wild fire. Draco couldn’t help but sneer at his ability to get the-boy-who-lived to lose control.

Ah, sweet normality.

“I *haven’t*—” growled Potter through gritted teeth, clearly trying to control his temper. “I haven’t forgotten.”

There was a sort of pained look in his green eyes, something Draco saw in Hermione so very often. He guessed it was grief and misery. He didn’t like the thought that he had understood why Potter was feeling this way.

He knew how to understand and recognize feelings and emotions now.

He smirked condescendingly, silently daring Potter to hex him.

But after what looked like a struggling battle with his dark demons, Potter lowered his wand. And then he sat back on the stool in defeat and downed what was left of the cognac.

“Don’t flatter yourself, you sodding git. This isn’t for you. You’ve no idea how much I want to murder you right now. I have my reasons,” he stated bitterly.

Draco stared at him blankly, too confused to even utter a reply. He didn’t know whether to be relieved or suspicious.

What reasons?

“You’ve had it all this time.” The stark realization rattled his brain intensely. “You’ve had proof of me all this time, haven’t you? How long have you had proof?”

Potter didn’t answer, but he made no attempt to deny his accusation either. He just continued to mutter bitterly under his breath.

Draco knew he could escape Azkaban if he ever got caught, but the truth was that he valued complete freedom too much to risk such a thing. He had done many things (gaining Albus Dumbledore’s trust, manipulating the Council with his charm and words) to be able to make sure he had it. Potter had always been one of the eager ones who wanted to take that away from him.

Now that Draco had mistakenly dipped his bloodied hands in salty waters, the sharks would likely rip him apart.

Only, Potter didn’t seem to want to rip him apart. Surely, Potter knew he was a danger to Hermione? Perhaps he was just buying time? Waiting for the right moment? If he were Potter that was what he would have done.

But that’s just it, isn’t it? He isn’t Potter...

Potter was good, trusting and caring. He was a hero who dedicated his life to destroying evil and saving the day.

Draco turned to leave, his mind buzzing with thoughts, wondering why he hadn’t just murdered Potter five years ago, when he’d had the chance. The boy was like a cat with nine fucking lives.

He cursed under his breath.

“Malfoy,” he heard from behind him. Potter sounded a bit unsure. “Hermione told me about Greengrass... I—er—thanks, I guess—for saving Hermione’s life, I mean.”

Oh right, Greengrass. Brilliant. He wondered why he hadn’t just killed the bint when Hermione wasn’t looking. He could have just aimed a perfectly good Avada *and then* have her dead corpse devoured by the leeches. They’d have all thought the cause of death was blood loss and not murder. So why hadn’t he done *that*?

Bloody feelings, that’s why.

Draco scowled and continued to walk away, his long, hooded robes billowing beneath him. He never looked back.

When Hermione woke up on Friday morning; she started packing her things. Professor McGonagall had requested Hermione to be the substitute teacher of Arithmancy for the next few weeks. Hermione had downright refused the woman at first because she hadn't felt like teaching at all. But Harry had convinced her to change her mind.

He had apologized to her when he'd caught her at work a few days after their argument back at SFOWW. She had apologized to him too, relieved to be on speaking terms with him again.

And then he'd mentioned that the Arithmancy teacher was an Order Member who had left for a mission regarding Death Eater sightings somewhere near the Malfoy Manor. When she'd asked Harry to elaborate further, he'd glared at her and scolded her about seeking revenge again.

Harry insisted that she needed a break from Malfoy and Hogwarts was the perfect place for her to relax and clear her thoughts. He'd even asked permission from Madam Dumann herself. Hermione supposed he was right. Too often she found herself sitting by the fire and thinking about Draco while scratching a purring Crookshanks behind the ears...

Harry had been right after all. The moment she stepped into Hogwarts she felt loads better.

She was a little girl again, coming back to the safety of home after a long day of cuts and bruises.

She was being healed each and every day.

And as the weeks flew by, she felt like herself again. She ate normally and slept properly again. She met a new house-elf and played Wizarding chess with Moaning Myrtle. One of her students got her first O in an Arithmancy test and hugged her. She tried something Gryffindor and stupid and went skinny dipping on the lake one midnight and she remembered how to eat and enjoy desserts.

And all her dark thoughts became a distant blur.

She'd never realized how much she'd missed Hogwarts. She couldn't help the tears as she gave her last goodbyes.

"No good sittin' worryin' abou' it," Hagrid whispered to her ear as he hugged her one last time. His eyes were watery but he was smiling. From behind him, the rest of her new students were crying as well. "What's coming will come, an' we'll meet it when it does. Yer goin' to be fine, yah hear? Yeh're our Hermione Granger, the brightes' witch yer age. Don' yah forget 'at."

Hermione smiled back. She definitely felt a great deal better.

He watched her as she kneeled hurriedly beside the boy and stared worriedly at his weak, bleeding chest.

After three weeks of being *banned* to see her, another two weeks because he had been busy with business meetings and insufferable death eaters, Draco spoiled himself and observed Hermione Granger a little longer.

She was still stunning, even in her misery, her enormous brown eyes sparkling with tears. Her soft brown locks had grown longer, cascading down to her breasts and framing her pretty face perfectly. Her skin looked soft and warm to the touch, tempting him to run his hands all over her. He let his eyes roam over her petite form and he felt himself growing hard at the sight. Granger really, really looked good in those tight fitting pencil skirts. Merlin, he couldn't get enough of the woman.

He had stayed hidden in the shadows so she didn't see him until he started walking towards her, the soft sound of his footsteps reaching her ears. He felt her become rigid as a stone as he stood quietly across from her, but other than that she didn't acknowledge his presence. Draco supposed it was because she was still too busy with the limp, bleeding body between them.

He stared at the open eyes of the Creevey kid as he lay unmoving on the floor. They were pure, unstained white. He compared them to winter snow.

"A man asked me to meet with him months ago," he said casually. "I reckon he was a Ministry Official... Could see the word failure imprinted on his forehead. You know what he told me, Granger?"

She looked up at him and he caught a glimpse of her beautiful, tearstained face up close: her long lashes, flushed cheeks and delectable pink lips. Something changed about her... She looked better, more... *radiant*. He stared down at the Creevey kid again, slightly nudged the boy's lifeless hand with his leg.

"He bored me to death with his life story. Told me all that nonsense about how he gambled all his money. Turns out he was in big trouble with the Goblins. Borrowed loads of gold off them and he didn't have the money to pay them back. Then he asked me, no, he begged me actually—to give him some money. He said he had kids and a pet donkey or pig or something. Then he showed me the pictures."

He watched as she took out her wand and tried different healing spells to get the boy to wake. No doubt, those spells were complex and difficult to cast. But the boy remained unmoving. He smirked.

"I told him I'd pay all his debts and give him something for his children. I suppose that makes me a *compassionate, loving* man, hmm? So now I *am* qualified to be *family*." he said in a mock gentle voice.

Hermione let out a snort, still concentrating on her healing spells. "Hardly. There must've been something you asked from him. Knowing you, you probably asked for his soul in return."

He actually found this funny.

"I'm hurt that you think so badly of me, really," he snorted. "But you're right, Princess, I asked something from him... not his soul though... I have no need for that when I already have yours."

He was pleased when this made her lose her concentration.

The silence between them lasted only for a few seconds before she spoke again.

“You asked him to steal Dennis’ camera, didn’t you?” The voice was so soft, he barely heard it. ‘Dennis hates the 5th level lab, he thinks it’s haunted. You knew only a few people ever come here; it’s the perfect place to set me up!’ He saw her knuckles turn white as she clenched her wand tighter. “All you had to do was have someone tell Dennis that they saw a camera here. You attacked him when he was busy with his camera so he wouldn’t see you! And—and that man—he had no choice but to do what you wanted! He couldn’t say no because he was desperate!”

She was looking at him in outrage now. Her brown eyes blazed to life.

She looked so adorable that he couldn’t help but pull out Creevey’s camera in one hand and take a picture.

“Really Princess, don’t act so surprised.”

She angrily snatched the camera away from him. Too many people had already been lost. He would not stop. He would never stop until he had her.

“The curse is Voldemort’s own creation,” he whispered in a low baritone. “The man was a genius, I must admit. There’s only one counter curse, you know.”

Hermione stared back at Dennis while taking in deep, calming breaths. Her lips were shaking. The dead look in his eyes made more tears run down her cheeks. She could still save him. She would not let him down. She had been prepared for this. What was coming would come and she was *not* going to back down, she was going to meet it when it came.

Thanks for the advice, Hagrid.

Draco waited patiently and savored the air of victory around him.

“Save him,” she pleaded finally. She did not hesitate to reach out and touch the fabric of his sleeve, and he supposed she might’ve touched his hand, had it not been hidden in his pocket. The small gesture surprised him. “Please.”

He locked eyes with her and he easily lost himself in her watery dark specks. A tinge of resentment made itself known to him, crawling uncomfortably up his skin. So that was what it was: the anger he felt whenever he saw her care for other people. He’d never known what it was before. It was all too clear now.

He was *jealous*... jealous because Hermione worried too much for this eighteen year old boy who she had only met a year ago, jealous because Hermione saw something in this boy, this *filth*, that was clearly worth saving.

He considered just letting Creevey die an agonizing death, right then and there.

Draco looked calm once again, but Hermione had already learned to read between his lines, to understand him. She noticed the twitch on his lower lip and knew immediately that he was bothered.

And he was not amused even though everything had gone his way.

“You know what I want,” he said quietly.

She blinked three times before finally making up her mind. She was going to be fine, whatever happened. She wasn't alone in this. She had people who cared for her.

She felt herself nod.

He squatted beside Dennis, letting his wand roam over the boy's chest. Hermione watched in awe as he muttered the incantations, his face scrunched in pure concentration.

There was a white light at the tip of his wand. She let her eyes wander to his hands, they were big and strong. She remembered how they felt on her skin. They weren't soft at all, but rough and hard, *masculine* hands. The sort of hands that had endured, the sort of hands that had murdered, the sort of hands that illogically made her feel safe.

Somewhere inside the dark corners of her mind, she decided that he had really beautiful hands.

And she mentally slapped herself for thinking it.

The light from his wand faded, willing her to snap out of her trance. Dennis bolted upright, awake and alive. Hermione could hardly contain her glee.

"What hap—?" he started but was muffled as soon as Hermione crushed him into a tight embrace.

"Oh thank Merlin," she said in relief.

"Are we in the fifth level laboratory? Draco? Merlin, how did I—?"

Hermione bossily demanded that he stopped talking, holding his cheeks with both her hands so that he would look at her. Her eyes were full of concern.

"Dennis, listen to me," she said seriously. "I want you to go to St. Mungo's immediately and get yourself checked. You've been attacked. I saved you but I still want to be sure. When you're fully healed, tell Harry not to worry about me and that I'm fine. And tell him not to look for me."

"Why? Where are you goi—"

"I promise I'll finish the Denovorum. As long as you promise me you'll keep taking your medication and keep going to St. Mungo's everyday for your daily check—"

"Healer Granger, I don't under—"

"Promise me, Dennis" she said, pressing her hands harder on his cheeks. "Promise me."

He looked so scared and worried but she knew he trusted her with his life. He nodded. They stood up together and she handed him back his camera.

"You found it," he said, while grinning slightly. The boy was endearing. She playfully ruffled his hair.

"Told you I would, didn't I?"

He hugged her tight, as if to say thanks. Hermione hugged him back. She loved Dennis Creevey so much, considered him to be her own little brother. He was family.

“Will you be alright?” he whispered in her ear.

“Of course,” she assured him. “I’m Hermione Granger, remember?”

This statement made him smile again.

He started walking backwards, his eyes darting between her and Draco. A worried expression still marred his features, but he pushed it aside. Hermione knew Dennis had every faith in her. He finally turned around and ran to the exit.

And she was left alone in the damp quiet of the laboratory with him. She was aware of his intimidating presence again.

She had to settle for looking at his hard chest since she barely reached his shoulders. He smelled so good... mint, soap and something heavenly...

He gently brushed her wet cheeks with his fingers and she didn’t stop him, captivated by the obsessive yet affectionate look in his eyes. It was a simple gesture, but Hermione knew it was his own way of apologizing for making her cry, even if he didn’t know it.

He offered her his hand. Hermione stared at it again, imagining her surroundings to melt away for a brief second. She pressed her lids shut. No, this was merely a ball and he was nothing more than a random stranger asking her to dance.

A dance was safer than this after all.

“Come.”

She did her best to hide the shakiness of her whole body, bravely reaching out to him. The next thing she touched was his hand and soon all she saw was darkness. A stretching, squeezing feeling overcame her and she was being pressed very hard from all directions. It didn’t surprise her that he had appurated and had taken her alongside him.

And then they were in the Department of Magical Research and Development no more.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

DUH DUH DUM.

No good sittin’ worryin’ abou’ it....What’s coming will come, an’ we’ll meet it when it does.

Came from Goblet of fire as well as, **Turns out he was in big trouble with the Goblins. Borrowed loads of gold off them**

Last scene was inspired by Chamber of Secrets

We’re nearing the end ! 5 or so chapters left because I have this Thou-shall-not-write-more-than-18-chapters rule :))

Guess what happens next, I dare you :p bahaha

Chapter 10

I made a dramione graphic for the first time in my life :)) Good thing I got a lot of practice making banners for my previous forum. If you want to see it, visit my links area :D

WARNING : Sexual content XD Here's the promised warning ;)

To my lovely beta, Pooja (murtagh799), thank you for all the notes and advice \:D/ Drop by her page and send her my love ;)

To all my readers and reviewers, thank you! Take these oatmeal sandwiches made with love. I hope you like them :D

First sentence is from Jerry Spinelli's novel, *Stargirl*. This author is a bloody genius. I highly recommend this book..

Okay go :p

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

“I was sixteen years old. In that time, how many thousands of smiles had been aimed at me?

So why did this one feel like the first?”

They had apparated in front of the gates of the enormous Malfoy Manor. Hermione found herself being dragged along the long pathway towards his large estate. His grip on her was like an iron fist, as if he was anxious that if he loosened, she would drift too far away for him to reach.

His long legs took lengthy strides, giving her minimal time to observe the sinister surroundings. The outside was no longer a garden that once held flowers and plant sculptures when she had first been here. It was now a forest studded with tall trees that cloaked the grounds with darkness. Thrice, she had tripped on her feet due to his quick pace and thrice he had slowed down, steadying her gently and breaking her fall.

He always did that; act so inconsiderate and wicked one moment, protective and affectionate the next.

Hermione suddenly remembered her odd conversations with Luna, how the clever girl had insisted that Draco Malfoy indeed knew how to love.

He just had a different way of showing it.

‘Different,’ when it came to Draco, meant using any means necessary: his power, influence and cunning—a Slytherin through and through.

Different meant becoming a brilliant mastermind behind carefully planned schemes to ensure her surrender. He had known all the details and loopholes and made sure he’d sealed

them tight too, ensuring that there would be no means of escape. He had used her insecurities, her conscience, and the people she cared about against her. He had lulled her into a false sense of security, if only for a while.

After that, he'd retaliated with a vengeance.

Despite all this, Hermione still didn't want to believe Luna's absurd theory—that Draco Malfoy had wasted so much of his time and effort, scheming and setting up such ingenious traps—just because he *loved* her.

Luna had had a hidden message beneath her words. Something only Hermione could ever understand.

From the very beginning he had lived in a place where love was seen as a flaw, a secret to be buried deep within one's heart and never to be spoken of again. His parents, though they had loved him dearly, loved Voldemort to a greater extent. Draco had been forced to conceal every feeling, that in the end he was left with a hollow shell and nothing more.

Luna had reminded her that Draco was not Voldemort. Draco's 'different' way of showing his feelings was spiteful and cruel simply because it was the only way he'd known how...

Draco hadn't rang the doorbell. They merely stood in the exquisite front porch hand in hand, staring at the front doors. She tried to ignore the shivers running down her spine as his thumb massaged her hand lightly, tracing little circles in her skin. After several minutes of awkward silence, she finally looked up at him in annoyance.

"Aren't you going to ring that?"

He looked like a stunning statue, one that might have been displayed in an art gallery. He was flawless and refined in his impressive stillness.

He didn't answer.

His lack of response raised her suspicions. Immediately, her thoughts turned to all the possible tragic situations she might encounter once he opened the doors. She thought of seeing dead bodies, Death Eaters, Voldemort himself. She even imagined Draco's parents back from the dead, waiting to meet her and then invite her over for dinner. The disturbing mental image was enough to make her queasy. If she had to wait a second longer, she would undeniably go bonkers.

She hysterically moved to ring the blasted doorbell but his threatening voice stopped her before she could even reach it.

"Ring it and I'll rip your arm off," he drawled warningly, not even bothering to spare her a glance.

She scoffed and dropped her hand to her side. She wanted to cross her arms over her chest petulantly, but he was still holding her other hand so she settled for glaring at him instead.

"I reckon you've read about this curse," he said wearily, still not looking at her, "Created by the early Wizarding families to protect their respective family traditions."

"The Traditionem curse?" she said hotly. "Used properly, the Traditionem Curse can be cast on a certain tradition and all who break that tradition will die. It was banned by the

Ministry on 1757."

Draco couldn't help but roll his eyes as she recited the words precisely as they were written in the books. Despite all the misery he'd put her through, her sanity and *morals* were still intact. She was still the same know-it-all Hermione Granger; strong-minded and unbroken.

"50 points to Gryffindor," he muttered darkly.

"What does the curse have to do with any of this?" she demanded, her voice rising. She moved to ring the doorbell again but he grabbed her other hand roughly and glared at her.

"We're married, need I remind you? You are a Malfoy now. Our family has... *traditions* to uphold."

He stared at the doors impatiently again. Hermione studied his expressionless face and wondered what he was thinking of. She had a feeling that the doorbell wasn't the problem at all; something else was obviously dampening his mood.

"Your family used the Traditionem curse," she said, more as a statement rather than a question.

"Yes. Ring that doorbell and you'll be cursed to oblivion," he said, grimacing. "Don't even think about it."

"I wasn't going to!" she responded loudly.

"Good. Because if you die, love, I'll make sure everyone you care about dies with you," he added leisurely as an afterthought. "You wouldn't want that, do you?"

He was serious about this. It was clear by the tone of his voice.

She started fidgeting hysterically. Who knew what kind of disturbing traditions the Malfoy family had?

He must have noticed her uneasiness because he turned his pretty blond head, boring his stormy grey eyes into her once more. She determinedly held his gaze and tried not to squirm under his brutal scrutiny.

"You put on a believable brave front, Granger," he said in bored voice. "Relax. You'll be fine."

At that moment, Hermione swore that somewhere on the revolving earth, pigs were now flying to the vast blue skies... because Draco Malfoy had actually *smiled*.

It was a very small smile, barely an upward tug of his left cheek. She'd almost thought she had imagined it, because it disappeared in a blink of an eye and he returned to gazing at the doors again. It had looked nothing like the cruel, sadistic smiles he usually threw her way. It had been *real*.

One minuscule smile from him and her knees became incredibly weak.

Bloody hell.

As if his smile hadn't been bad enough, she felt him give her hand a light squeeze, a gesture of reassurance. She was so shocked and astonished by the sudden uncharacteristic niceness, she didn't even notice the double doors creak open.

"Welcome," said a deep, raspy voice.

Hermione tore her eyes away from Draco and almost fainted at the sight before her.

The voice belonged to an old man, a butler, clad in traditional butler uniform, complete with white gloves too. Her jaw dropped so low that she was sure it would touch the ground.

She heard a small pop and confetti sprinkled into the air.

Several people wearing black and white maid outfits stood behind the butler, waiting for them. They formed two straight lines, aligning the path to the grand staircases, facing each other. They bowed at the same time, remarkably synchronized. She couldn't stop gawking at them.

Maids? In the Malfoy Manor?

"Lord and Lady Malfoy, welcome to the Malfoy Manor," they said in perfect harmony.

L-Lady Malfoy?

"Surprise," Draco whispered in her ear teasingly. Then she felt Draco's hand *on her bum*, giving her a slight push forward. Had it been any other occasion, she would have punched him straight on his undeserving face, but at the moment she was too preoccupied.

Everyone was quiet. All eyes were on her.

"Uh—hi—"

What the bloody hell was she supposed to say?

He smirked as Hermione stiffly took a few steps away from him (with a little push, of course. No, he hadn't just *groped* her). He could actually feel her face burning as she stood nervously in front of everyone. She turned her head to him, silently begging him for support, in which he only responded with his best smug smile. *Merlin*, he really enjoyed annoying the hell out of Granger.

Besides, it was tradition that the servants of the household welcome the new Lord of the Manor and his wife.

After a few minutes of silence, he cleared his throat loudly making Hermione wince.

"I—er—t-thanks everyone," she choked out ungracefully. He couldn't help but chuckle at her distress.

She was just too adorable, that one.

It was a beautiful sunny afternoon in the Potters' front garden. Mrs. Potter was currently kneeling over a bed of colorful flowers, digging a hole with a shovel that was oddly shaped like a deformed head of a house elf. There was dirt all over her unusual lavender dress. Her

long blonde hair highlighted with streaks of pink was tied up into a messy bun. There were mud-stains on her nose and cheeks.

She looked very pretty—stunning, actually—but Harry wasn’t here to mull over that right now.

He wanted answers.

“Oh hello, Harry,” she said in her naturally dreamy voice. However she didn’t get up to hug and kiss him as was usual between them. She must’ve noticed his sour mood. “I’m afraid my hands are dirty and I can’t make—”

“Malfoy took her,” he said quietly. He closed his eyes shut to control his raging emotions, threatening to break loose and cloud his judgment once again. “You told me not to send him to Azkaban—and he just... *took her*.”

She didn’t say anything, didn’t even look startled. Instead she just buried the roots of an odd plant into the hole she had dug. Harry waited, clenching and unclenching his fists.

“I’m glad you listened to me when I told you to send Hermione to Hogwarts. I was a little worried about her when I saw her after your little argument. She looked a right mess. Hogwarts did her a lot of good, you kno—”

“I’m bloody well aware it did her good!” Harry snapped back furiously. “What I want to know is why we hadn’t arrested the reason she got in such a mess in the first place!”

Luna only ignored his abrupt outburst and smiled serenely at him. It caught him off guard for a moment, but it did nothing to lessen his anger.

“Are you going to explain or—” he said through gritted teeth. “Just tell me what’s going on!”

He couldn’t help himself. He was still worried knowing that Hermione was now in Malfoy’s domain, alone and unprotected. *What if she ends up like Ron?* He couldn’t bear the thought of losing a best friend again.

“I know how worried you are,” Luna said calmly. “It’s perfectly norma—”

“Do you?” he asked loudly, irritated. “Have you any idea—”

“Hermione is safe, I’m sure,” she said with all certainty, he was almost inclined to believe her. “Draco will keep her safe.”

“Right, because he’s done such a good job of it in the past,” he said sarcastically.

Despite his scathing remarks, she remained quite calm.

She gestured for him to come closer. When he moved to kneel in front of her, she held his hand gently to comfort him. Harry felt the mud pressed in his palms as she did so. He loved the feel of her hand on his.

She always knew how to calm him down.

He stared at the flower firmly rooted to the ground.

“Very extraordinary plants, Dragon flowers are. One plant costs a hundred Galleons.”

“Not to sound rude or anything, dear, but I don’t rea—”

“It was a gift from a fan of the Quibbler,” she continued serenely, completely ignoring his interruption. “We wrote an article about Dragon flowers a few years back.”

She was probably finding the best way to explain this to him. The best he could do now was to trust her and listen. He let out an exasperated sigh.

“Fine then,” He inhaled deeply, regaining his composure. “What’s so special about them?”

Luna gave him an appreciative glance, thankful that he was willing to listen.

“Oh they have a lot of uses. They kill weeds and protect the other plants. They also tend to breathe fire... hence the name.”

Harry watched the odd ‘Venus flytrap-like’ flower as wisps of smoke surrounded the flower when it opened its mouth. He could probably fit his whole fist inside it.

“But they tend to get lonely. Dragon flowers are very rare, you see. Only a few grow every year and most of them shrivel up and die if they have the misfortune of growing alone. The Dragon flowers that die out of loneliness mourn and breathe fire before their deaths, killing every other plant within proximity.” She started planting another flower beside the first one. “The ones that live longer, the ones that die in peace, always come in pairs.”

Once she finished planting the two Dragon flowers, Harry watched in fascination as both flowers extended their vines and wrapped themselves around each other. They no longer looked like two separate plants. They became one. It was rather beautiful. He felt a curious need to touch them.

“As individuals, they’re brilliant. But together...” She threw a rock at the entwined flowers but they sprouted fire, protecting each other. “No one can harm them.”

“So what you’re saying is—er—” Harry said unsurely. “Hermione is—”

“Draco’s beloved Dragon flower,” she finished for him happily. “And if we take her away from Draco, I’m afraid he might explode, taking us all with him.”

“S-sorry?” he blurted out, disbelief marring his features.

Luna’s eyes were still trancelike but there was a melancholic tinge in them now. She was frowning.

“Metaphorically speaking, Harry.” She stood abruptly and helped him up. She dusted off the dirt on his robes, straightened his shirt and fixed his glasses. She did all this with a far-away look in her eyes, as if she wasn’t aware of what she was doing. “Hermione blames herself because people have died because of her. She’s not looking at the bigger picture at all.”

Harry wiped the dirt on her cheeks and nodded. He knew she was in her own world again. He hugged her and closed his eyes, letting himself be carried away by the sound of her soft voice.

“If it weren’t for her, Draco would have forgotten how to feel. He kills because he loves her. He kills those who he thinks might get in the way of his being with her. It’s wrong but

she can still fix it. She can fix him.”

Harry thought back to the events that had taken place atop the Astronomy Tower once more. Five years ago, at the Winter Masquerade Massacre, Harry had been there when Hermione had screamed Malfoy’s name. The look on his face had been unexplainable, something close to being scared, amused, confused and angry all at the same time. And then different emotions had flashed before his once cold eyes. He had looked as though he’d just woken up after being numb and dead for so long. Back then, Harry had never fully understood what had really happened to Draco Malfoy—why he had jumped to his death.

This was one of the things he loved about Luna, her ability to see things other people could not. Harry knew now...

Malfoy was alive when he was with Hermione.

Up to now, every decision he had ever made, every person he had killed, all pointed back to her. He had done all this for her. If she stayed with him, he wouldn’t find a reason to kill anymore.

If anyone could change Malfoy, it was Hermione. And to do that, she needed to understand him. She needed to stay with him.

“Harry?”

Harry snapped out of his musings and looked at Luna again. Her protuberant eyes stared back at him in all seriousness.

“Imagine if he never loved her at all, or if by some unknown force, they get permanently separated. He would kill so many more people. He would be empty and he would kill *just because he can*. He won’t have any reasons. He would have nothing to live for, nothing to lose. He would live his life yearning, never satisfied with his material possessions, always wanting more. Without her, he would want the world and everything in it, anything to replace her with...”

She leaned her head on the crook of his neck and wrapped her arms around him too.

“He would start another war, a bigger one, resulting to more bloodbaths than anyone could count just so he could rule. He would have no remorse because he would have forgotten what it felt like. And he’d have no one to teach him how. *He has no one*. And Voldemort—” Her voice cracked slightly. Harry hugged her tighter. “Voldemort would win even if he’s already dead... because his heir still lives. If he never loved her, Draco’s soul would have belonged to *him*, not Hermione...”

He dragged her up the grand staircases, past doors and doors until they reached the end of the hall. She couldn’t stop to explore. The place was bigger than she’d thought... so many twists and turns, so many rooms.

Next thing she knew, they were inside an enormous room and he was locking the door.

“D-Draco,” she warned, eyeing him nervously.

Ignoring her, he stepped forward and she automatically took two steps back. She reached to grab her wand but he was faster. He summoned it using wandless magic and threw it carelessly over his shoulder. Horrified, she swallowed a dry lump in her throat.

“You’ve had your fun, Granger,” he said seriously, taking another threatening step towards her. “What was that phrase you used again? Oh yes—*enough games*.”

“I’m not playing!” She looked around frantically, searching for a way out, telling herself not to panic. “You just— stay away from me!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, love,” his voice sounded misleadingly tender, as if he meant her no harm. He eyed her up and down and licked his lips. She didn’t miss the desire etched in his features. “You see, I’ve been holding back for far too long. You’ve absolutely no clue how hard it is to control myself around you.”

“N-no. You wouldn’t—”

“Is that a challenge?” he drawled menacingly.

“This is rape, Draco!” she bellowed, pointing an accusing finger at him. Desperate, she grabbed the nearest thing she could find: an expensive-looking vase. She hurled it at him, missing him by a few inches. “You—you’re going to force me to have unwanted sexual intercourse!”

He stopped and raised an eyebrow.

“I know what rape means, Granger. And that—” he said while glaring daggers at her and nudging his head at the broken vase. “—was a family heirloom.”

He continued stepping closer... too close for comfort. “Besides, it’s not rape if you’re going to like it.”

His seductive voice made her stomach flutter. She fidgeted in fear and anticipa—*UGH NO. Bullocks!* She was *not* in any way or form *anticipating* anything. She was not *anticipating* him sweeping her off her feet and shagging her senseless. She was not *anticipating*, period. She was not!

Keep telling yourself that and maybe you’ll actually believe it.

Good Godric, who was she fooling! How was she supposed to resist this beautiful man who looked like he was ‘painted by the gods themselves’, walking purposely towards her? He was too tempting. And his mysteriousness attracted her more than she cared to admit.

And did he really have to look like *that*? Why can’t he just look like a hideous troll for once?

“I’ll be gentle, I promise,” he said, smirking deviously. It was one of *those* smirks, the kind that made all the other girls swoon.

“And you say I’m the liar,” she said while snorting.

Funny how completely contrasting they looked at the moment. She was flailing, on the verge of hysteria, while he, on the other hand, was absolutely calm and at ease, hands tucked on his pockets.

In one swift move he had sauntered in front of her. She didn't have time to think. All she felt was being pushed roughly against the wall. She gasped as pain lanced through her back. It all happened so fast, she almost felt like she was dreaming.

She hated it. She hated him for making her feel this way. And she hated herself for wanting him, *loving* him.

Draco's tongue invaded her mouth relentlessly and explored every inch, every corner. She tasted like honey, all sweet and warm. He heard her sigh in defeat against his lips. And then, in a slow, gentle manner, she started kissing him back, letting her tongue move and sway with his. He let out an animalistic growl at her impulsive submission. He kissed her more hungrily, brutal and persistent and she kissed back with the same forceful passion.

She did not remember how they got tangled in the soft green sheets or how they had removed the thin fabric that separated their skins. All she remembered was him; all she saw was him, the softness of his lips as he kissed her in all tenderness and fervor. His mouth was warm and amazingly sweet. He tasted like cigarettes, like expensive wine, and she couldn't get enough.

She did not think to fight him off this time, not even once.

She was finally giving into her cravings, finally admitting to herself that she wants this.

He kissed her chin, her jaw, her neck and marked the sensitive spot there. She felt his sturdy hands all over her and each pleasant touch sent shivers down her spine. He aligned himself on top of her, her hardened nipples pressed against his chest. Their bodies clung desperately to each other in a warm embrace, skin on skin, and she couldn't decide whether his body was soft or hard, or maybe both if that was even possible. She was losing her mind just thinking about it.

She reached out to brush her fingers through his soft hair.

A part of her, (the sane, reasonable part) screamed at her to stop this but she just didn't want to listen. Just this once, she wanted to do this for herself. She didn't want to deny her desire for him anymore. She wanted to *let go*, to lose control.

To hell with the consequences.

Draco heard her gasp loudly when he shoved a finger between her legs. She was so tight. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer, arched her back when he inserted another finger, pumping in and out, stroking, pinching her, and rubbing her clit. He would make her feel things she'd never thought possible, make her enjoy this as much as he would. Her lust-filled moans made him grow harder. His other arm snaked around her back possessively and he positioned his hardened length at her wet entrance.

His deep voice, a low and gentle hum, muttered soothing words into her ear.

"Do you love me?"

Hermione felt his hand leave her tight entrance and move up to her stomach. Then he cupped her breast and squeezed it, brushing his wet fingers over the mound. She moaned louder from the overwhelming sensations. He covered her mouth with his lips again,

devouring her with more obsessive kisses. Then he pushed the head of his member at her tight opening, but he hadn't pushed all the way.

She groaned. She wanted all of him inside her now. *Right now.*

"Do you?" His warm breath touched her sensitive flesh before he leaned forward again. His lips were tender as it caressed hers this time. The sincerity of his words pulled her heartstrings, made her shiver. It sounded like a desperate need. It was as though his whole world depended on her answer.

Hermione have never felt so wanted by anyone, not like this.

When Draco didn't hear her respond he felt his heart clench. He wanted her to say something, *anything*. Annoyed, he suddenly bit her hard, making her cry out. The metallic taste of her blood intoxicated him and he licked and sucked each drop. She pulled away and pressed her hands to his cheeks, like she had done to Creevey kid before they left. It made him feel... elated. It made him feel like she cared about him too, if not more.

She stared straight into his soul. They were so close that her forehead was pressed against his own and her warm breaths tickled his face. He was perplexed by the gravity of her gaze, the brownness of her eyes.

The corners of her lips curled upward, and Draco was awestruck, speechless. He was blessed, once again, with the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

...her smile.

"Yes," she said breathlessly, roughly pulling his hair hard, so she could kiss him again. He groaned at the painful tug of his scalp, but he didn't care. For the first time in his life, he was overwhelmed.

This time he was sure she hadn't been lying.

She kissed him gently once more, so gentle in fact, that he never expected the abrupt pain he felt when she suddenly bit his lower lip in retaliation. He pulled back in time to see his little minx stick her tongue out and chuckle. He rolled his eyes.

Honestly, even in bed they wanted to best each other.

Hermione would have laughed harder but he was kissing her again, harder, teasing her, punishing her, as if her little stunt thrilled him all the more. His abrupt cheerful mood was rather contagious. She felt it flowing through her veins, an effect of their bond. Then he smiled against her lips.

"I love you too."

And suddenly she was being stretched and filled up entirely as he pushed his hard length completely inside her wet core. Her heart pounded out of her chest, both from his truthful words and his physical plunge. She felt euphoric. She felt wonderful. She felt completely blissful. Her body burned and tingled from the pleasurable contact. She met him in each overwhelming, lust-filled thrusts.

The intense heat burned through her aggressively as she reached her peak, heightening the delightful sensations, pushing her viciously over the edge.

And soon her vision blurred and she was seeing stars... and so was he...

They felt a jolt of bliss spreading through every inch of their bodies at the same time. They were drowning in the sweetest pleasures, panting, gasping for breath.

And then they lost themselves in each other's arms...

Being safe, as she had told herself so many times before, was one of the best feelings she had ever felt in her entire existence. She couldn't describe it in exact words; only compare it to similar sensations. It was like walking down an alley late at night without having to worry about being mugged. It was like flying and feeling the wind on your face without having to worry about falling to your death. It was like... being fearless. It was sureness. It was invincibility, freedom, even.

Hermione was absolutely certain she was feeling it at present.

She rubbed her eyes, still not fully awake, her vision still blurred. The place between her legs was sore. Her whole body was sore, in fact. Despite this, Hermione had never felt so terribly rested and satiated. The last moments of sleep left her and her lids fluttered open to welcome the morning light.

She stared questioningly at the bed she was lying on, wondering why it felt so unfamiliar. It was clearly not hers. The room she was in wasn't hers either.

When she found an arm wrapped possessively on her stomach, she let out a quiet gasp.

Her brain finally started working again. *Draco*.

Like an unwelcomed mental flashback, the events of last night unfolded very quickly in her mind.

Hermione felt herself blushing furiously at the thought of how they'd made love again and again, until they were completely spent. She regretted nothing of it, of course. It had been one of the best nights of her life.

But right now she had to get out of here.

Very carefully, she held his arm up so she could maneuver herself away from him. He must've sensed the absence of the warmth beside him because he groaned in his sleep and pulled her back, crushing her to his hard chest.

She whispered obscenities in the air and glared at his strong arm. Even in unconsciousness, *Draco Malfoy* still managed to annoy her. It was truly a rare gift.

She forced herself not think about his body pressed against her back or his warm breaths at the back of her neck. Her comfortable place in his arms tempted her to close her eyes and fall asleep again. It disturbed her how they fitted each other so perfectly.

This was *exactly* what she had been so afraid of. If she stayed with him for too long, she would lose all sense and snap.

She decided to try again, carefully maneuvering herself through the tangled limbs and sheets. After a good 30 minutes, she managed to get off the bed, with her husba... with *Draco* still out cold. She allowed herself to stare at him for a while, admiring him in his unguarded state.

He looked so angelic without his usual mask of indifference. She couldn't help but smile.

She started searching for her clothes and shoes, but unfortunately, she could only find her knickers. She could see the strap of her bra peaking out on the bed just beneath *Draco*. She imagined her other clothes were probably there too.

Her mind was too muddled to concentrate on transfiguring clothes right now. And she would rather eat dung than risk waking *Draco* by using a summoning charm.

So 10 minutes later she was dressed haphazardly in her knickers, his oversized shirt that was long enough to be a mini dress on her, and a pair of old, green, knee-high socks she'd found while rummaging through his enormous walk-in closet. It had probably been part of his Quidditch uniform from when he'd been in Hogwarts. She couldn't find her shoes, and *Draco*'s shoes were much too big on her. So the socks would have to do.

She looked dreadful.

She could fix her appearance once she flooded back to her flat. Tucking her wand securely behind the his left sock, she gave one last longing look at *Draco* before turning the doorknob and opening the door as quietly as she possibly could.

She poked her head out and looked both ways, checking for any signs of movement. When she saw no one in the halls, she stepped out and closed the door. And then she walked to the right.

After a total of twelve very quiet steps, she heard an odd, whooshing sound. She stopped to listen closer.

And then she screamed.

Several vines appeared out of the ceilings, wrapping themselves around every part of her body and hauling her up. Next thing she knew she was suspended in mid-air, bound at her waist, arms and legs.

Dear Godric, the house was *alive*.

Very faintly, she heard the creaking sound of a door being opened and a series of pounding footsteps but she didn't have time to wonder where they came from. The vice-like grip was tightening fast, constricting her body painfully. She recognized the familiar-looking vines and shut her eyes tight.

Devil's Snare.

She reached for her wand, stretching her arm as close to it as possible. Then she blasted a blinding ray of sunlight unto the vines, causing them to loosen their crushing grip on her body. She braced herself for the impact of the fall...

Surprisingly it never came.

“Trying to escape so soon?”

For Merlin’s sake it was like the whole blasted *universe* was conspiring against her. She had found herself in Draco Malfoy’s arm, again!

And why the hell was he only wearing his pants?

He didn’t even look surprised at her attempt to escape. In fact he looked like he’d been expecting it. She crossed her arms over her chest and glowered up at him, resisting the urge to run her hands on his bare torso.

“Well you can’t expect me to stay here just because you want me to,” she snapped back. “I want out.”

He ignored her and started walking back to the room.

“This house is trying to kill me!”

He let out a soft chuckle and shook his head.

“I already told you—I won’t let anything bad happen to you, love.” He opened the door without any difficulty, even though he was still carrying her. “It’s built with traps so no one can break in.”

“So the prisoners won’t escape, more like,” she retorted, snorting. “I can’t believe this.”

“The Manor?” he asked, while setting her down gently and gracing her with his rare, killer smile again. Her legs immediately felt like jelly. He had to stop smiling like that. “Or the fact that you had sex with me repeatedly and enjoyed it?”

She fought the blush that was creeping up her cheeks and smacked him hard on the arm.

“Oh, shut up.”

“I like this look on you, you know.” He leaned closer, letting his lips brush her cheek. She felt his breath on her ear. “You look like you’ve just been thoroughly fuc—”

“Ugh! Malfoy!”

Suddenly they heard a loud tapping sound from the window. A large black owl was hovering outside, flapping her enormous wings. Hermione recognized her at once. She belonged to Blaise Zabini.

Once Draco received the letter, she quickly flew off.

Hermione eyed the letter curiously. Draco read it, grabbed both her wrists effortlessly with one hand and kept her at arm’s length when she tried to look. She couldn’t break free, even though he was just using one hand to subdue her. She scowled in annoyance, thinking of biting his hand while he wasn’t looking.

But he had already finished reading. He crumpled it in his fist, threw it on the floor and burned it with his wand. His face was a blank canvas once again, devoid of all emotions.

“What is it? What did he say?”

He gave her a look of utmost contempt and irritation. “He?”

“Blaise,” she said condescendingly, as if he was being stupid. “That was his owl.”

Fear seeped through her and ebbed in her veins when his hold on her wrists brutally tightened. He pulled her petite form so close, invading her personal space. His heavenly scent plagued her senses.

“Been writing him love letters, have you?” he hissed accusingly.

“What! No!” she said in outrage, feeling the need to defend herself. “Ginny sent me letters with that owl. Not him!”

For a while, he studied her features. Convinced, he released his grip and turned his back on her, searching for his robes. Hermione let out a sigh of relief.

But why is he still bothered? What was in that letter?

“Malfoy?” she whispered, out of genuine concern.

Draco forced himself not to look. He might not be able to restrain his desires if he did. All thoughts of leaving would surely vanish from his mind if that happened.

“Draco?”

“I have to do something,” he said blankly. “It can’t wait. Please just stay here, won’t you?” When he finally found his robes, he started getting dressed.

Hermione had stiffened behind him, stunned by what she’d just heard. *Did—did he just say please? Sincerely?* She blinked twice, rubbed her eyes roughly and stared at him to make sure he was real.

He was real, alright—Draco Malfoy, in the flesh—and he hadn’t even noticed he’d said it!

Luna was right. Like the porcelain vase Hermione had hurled at him last night, Malfoy was undeniably shattered and broken. Luna wanted Hermione to fix him and now, Hermione had finally decided to do it, no matter the high risk of being wounded.

She would glue him back together again — just because she loved him too.

When Draco was fully dressed, his gaze stubbornly fell on her again. *Sweet Salazar*, she was already tempting him to do unimaginable things to her person just by standing there and looking like that. She was so alluring and so fucking *irresistible*. The look of concern on her face pleased him further.

He couldn’t stop himself from grabbing her and kissing her hungrily, tasting her again, leaving her breathless. The kiss lasted longer than it should have. His self-restraint was dwindling—he had to stop. Now.

Sighing deeply, he forced himself away from her.

Those insufferable Death Eaters had the absolute *worst timing*. *Someone was going to pay*.

Once he was outside the room he gave her one last pointed look.

“You better be here when I get back, Princess.”

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Soooo... Please help me decide... Happy ending or sad ending? and why? :)

I know a smut scene, finally! I've been getting a lot of messages about it but I've been putting it off because I've never written anything like this before. We never had to write smut scenes in poetry. Did I do it right? Be nice to me please D:

Traditionem Curse — popped into my mind one day.

Dragon flower — wtf XD Seriously, the things I come up with :))

I hope I hear from you :) *hug*

Chapter 11

I love you all for your wonderful feedback, you amazing people. I'll treasure them in my heart forever :) Please accept this pasta with chocolate syrup instead of tomato sauce. I made it with love. :)

To my awesome beta, Pooja (murtagh799), thank you for everything! Drop by her page and send her my love :p

To Rose and Ryzel. They made me some amazing graphics. I made you guys some smores, with gravy :p If you want to see their graphics, visit my links area :)

Here it is...

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

“Sometimes I’m terrified of my heart; of its constant hunger for whatever it is it wants. The way it stops and starts.”

—Edgar Allan Poe

Hermione's wand started to emit red sparks after Malfoy had departed to Merlin-knows-where.

It was nothing big, really. It only meant that it was time to add another ingredient to the Denovorum.

A maid had entered the room and told her that her clothes had just arrived to the Manor, along with a few 'extras.' When she had asked what the extras were, the girl had just smiled at her and said it would be best if she took a look herself. Her name was Jacqueline and by the time Hermione had finished talking to her, she had found out that Draco had indeed freed all the house-elves in the Manor. Not with clothes— he just sent them off to Hogwarts where they would be well taken care off.

She was going to thank him for that later.

Hermione thought sending them to Hogwarts to free them was an awfully good idea. House-elves got extremely depressed by the mere sight of clothes. So, by giving them up somewhere where they could be free without crushing their hearts was a rather brilliant way of handling the situation.

Not to mention that he'd done it all *for her*.

Fighting the blush that was ebbing up her cheeks, she opened Draco's enormous closet once again. Her eyes almost popped out of their sockets. A few 'extras' apparently meant a whole closet full of colorful robes and gowns. She would never have guessed that these clothes were all meant for her, until she saw that they were, in fact, her size... She tried a

couple of them on and they all fit her perfectly... like they were especially made for her... even the shoes.

Trust him to do something as random as this.

Her wand emitted red sparks again, alerting her that she had one hour to get to the office. Now was the perfect time to find out if she could escape the evil clutches of the infamous Malfoy Manor. She wasn't going to permanently leave, of course. She would just visit her office for a while, then head back before anyone noticed.

She had read about the Malfoy Manor once. It had a charm that could detect any person who wanted to leave it. She had tested this by walking down the hallway, just to look around. The Devil's Snare hadn't attacked her and no other traps came at her.

But it was different now because she wanted to leave. The charm will definitely detect her no matter how hard she pretends. She had no other choice but to run as fast as she can. Hopefully, she'll get out of this alive. Easy enough. She was already used to life-threatening situations after all.

Her mission was simple: get to the fireplace in the sitting room undetected, floo to her office, add the next ingredient to the Denovorum, and come back in time for dinner.

Dinner, if she remembered correctly, was sometime around 7. She rolled her eyes.

She decided to wear an all black get-up: black long sleeved shirt, black jeans, black combat boots and a matching black cap (the most appropriate attire for her dangerous mission). She even contemplated on putting two strips of face paint on her cheeks but that would be thoroughly overdoing it. Gazing at her reflection in the mirror, she gave a satisfied nod at her reflection and tied her long locks into a messy bun. Her hair had always been a dead giveaway.

She looked like she was about to break into someone's house rather than attempt to escape one.

"Right," she told herself. "Constant Vigilance. Don't be stupid. You can do this, Hermione."

She sneaked out of the room and headed towards the right again, successfully avoiding the Devil's Snare she had encountered the first time. She was right, the charm had detected her wanting to escape. She ran to the end of the hall until she came across a fork.

Remembering what Jacqueline had told her, about the grand staircases located at the east side of the Manor, she headed to her right. At the end of the hall, she saw the staircases. *This is going to be easier than I thought.*

"Lady Malfoy!"

She cringed at the name and glanced back.

On her left she found maids carrying cleaning equipment, five of them. Her breath caught in her throat. They stared at her in confusion, that is, until they realized she was trying to escape. They dropped the things they were carrying, took their shoes off, and made a break for her.

So much for escaping undetected...

She bolted to the grand staircases in full speed, praying to the heavens that she could safely outrun them. It was at that moment where she noticed the walls on either side of her had started moving, inching towards her with each passing second. Her heart raced in panic. If she wasn't fast enough, her bones would be crushed to pieces!

To be squished by moving walls! What a way to bloody die!

She could see it, the light at the end of the hall that was slowly disappearing. She was going to make it! Her terror seemed to have made her run faster than she had ever run in her entire life.

Seconds before the walls closed completely behind her, she reached safety.

She let out a huge sigh of relief and paused a while to calm her nerves, bending forward with her hands on her knees. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead and her breaths came in short huffs. She wanted to cry out of exhaustion.

“Lady Malfoy!”

“We’ve found a solution, my Lord.”

He’d said it with his chin held high, so arrogant and proud, like he was trying to make an impression. Draco rolled his eyes even though he knew McNair couldn’t see them. The man took his silence as a sign to continue.

“The sixth stage is the hardest to pass through, but there is another way—a shortcut. The statue of the Ancient Goddess has a weakness. She’ll let us through with the right words...”

Draco remained perfectly still as the man trailed off. He stared impassively at nothing in particular, wondering why all of his meetings always resembled primeval rituals.

It always had, every time one of Voldie’s meetings would occur. He felt like he was a member of a cult in which they would chant words and speak in hushed tones, all thrilled for what was to come, all gathered to worship one thing...

Power.

He had never liked it, such underground gatherings. He had always found them boring.

He felt a faint throbbing in his chest, alerting him of a sudden emotional drive. He could’ve sworn he could recognize more and more emotions these days, but he didn’t know what to think of the feelings pounding in his chest.

On one hand emotions sometimes hindered him from making the best choices in a situation. He had to hand it to Voldemort, as crazy as the man was, he had been right when he’d told him that emotions had indeed clouded his judgment and hindered him from doing many brilliant things.

On the other, emotions *thrilled* him. Life seemed so empty without them. To feel something, anything, was indescribable. The way the heart beats so fast, almost as if it would

burst right out of one's chest. It pumped blood hastily through his veins, filling whatever emptiness he had.

It could mend him or it could destroy him.

“—fter we reach the seventh stage, what shall we find, my Lord?” asked McNair blankly. He was trying to read Draco's features even though they were half-hidden in the shadows of the hood of his cloak.

Slowly, Draco faced him and curled his lip upward into another smirk that was enough to make McNair look like he wanted to piss himself.

“Have you heard of the Death Chamber, McNair?” he replied in a voice that sent shivers down their spines. “It's in the Ministry of Magic... at the Department of Mysteries, to be exact. Dimly lit, with stone tiers leading down to a pit in the centre. In this pit is a dais, upon which stands a very old stone archway with a tattered black curtain hanging from it.”

He paused and paced the circle of Death Eaters gradually, his foot falls producing dull eerie thuds. Each hooded figure shifted in discomfort as he walked passed them.

“This archway separates the worlds of the living and the dead,” he continued in a somewhat bored tone. “Now it is said that this... arch... is where the souls go after the body is no longer capable.”

“Yes, but they cannot come back once they've gone through,” said a man standing to Draco's far left. The Death Eaters eyed the man suspiciously. They did not recognize his voice. “Surely, you know about this?”

“Indeed I do, Zabini,” Draco replied, his gaze falling on the man, impassively. The death eaters stared at Blaise in amazement and suspicion. They had all known that the Zabinis had chosen to be neutral during the Final Battle, despite the Dark Lord's threats to their family.

Now here he was, suddenly abandoning his neutral stance just because Draco had *asked* him too.

“Did any of you know that this archway—” he continued, “It had a twin?”

Draco heard them murmur amongst themselves once again. It was giving him a blasted headache.

“Impossible!” exclaimed one of them. “How come we've never heard—”

“At the seventh stage of the Department of Magical Research and Development, there is such a chamber known as the Ghost Chamber. Its purpose quite resembles the Death Chamber, but the difference is, the archway there is the path that lost souls use to come back.”

“Come back?”

“The ghosts, you moron,” Draco said, while rolling his eyes again. “The ghosts pass through that arch. Although they cannot retain their body any longer, their souls wander amongst the living.”

“So then what?” asked Travers in a curious tone, “The Dark Lord becomes a ghost?”

“I’m afraid dearest Voldie can’t become a ghost,” Draco answered. “But before he had died, our clever dark lord cast a dark spell that ensures that his soul would *always* find its way back.”

“And he’ll pass through that arch?”

“It’s the only way,” Draco responded blankly.

“He just passes through that arch, and he’s alive once again?” asked Dewhurst with a loud snort. She was still sore at him for cursing her. Draco did not miss the spite laced in her tone. He smirked at this. “Sounds rather ridiculous.”

Zabini eyed the woman condescendingly. “Didn’t you hear him? He said Voldemort used the Dark Arts. Of course it wouldn’t be that simple. He would need something else—”

“I don’t care who you think you are Zabini! How dare you speak the Dark Lord’s—”

Zabini ignored the woman and shifted his attention towards Draco again, trying to figure out what was on his mind. He really was quite a keen observer. Draco’s smirk widened.

“Zabini’s right, of course. There is such a thing as a sacrifice,” said Draco. “Although he had indeed used a spell so that his soul would find its way back, there is still a matter of his... *tangible form*.”

They did not speak, trying to process the information he’d given them. The only sound that could be heard amongst them was the rustling of the wind, until McNair let out a gasp.

“He would need—”

“A body—a vessel for his soul.” Draco stood in the middle of the circle again, boring his eyes into them. “Any volunteers?”

Meanwhile, Hermione had succeeded in stunning a lone maid unconscious. She hid the body in an empty room and exchanged clothes with her. While her new garments positively made her cringe, she thought it was a completely necessary precaution if she wanted her mission to be a successful one.

The first floor of the Manor looked dark and fear-provoking, strangely similar to the sets of muggle horror movies, it seemed. She didn’t pause to dilly-dally. Any second now, those five maids who’ve seen her would inform the others. And then all hell would break lose.

As she took a cautious step to the stairs, she felt the familiar empty sensations at the pit of her stomach, flowing through her body. The feeling wasn’t as cold as she had felt since she’d been at the hospital with him but it was frightening all the same.

He was here.

Panicking, she gathered all her energy and bolted as fast as she could. She ran at full speed, the fastest her exhausted legs could carry her. More maids appeared at the end of the grand staircases.

“Have you seen Lady Malfoy?” one of them asked her.

“Uh—” Hermione stuttered. “She’s upstairs.”

They almost bought it— *almost*.

“No wait—that’s her!”

They tried to stop her with their bare hands, reaching for her hastily. Their thin, sharp-nailed fingers sliced her skin as she struggled past them but she ignored the pain. No, they were nothing, nothing at all compared to *him*.

She dodged and aimed. She sent silent curses at everything and everyone that blocked her path as she searched for the sitting room.

“I’m sorry—” she yelled, not having enough time to assess the damage. *Run, Hermione Run.* She didn’t dare look back. He would be there.

And that would be the end of her for sure.

Once she finally reached the sitting room, she flung herself behind the furniture nearby, hurting her knees and palms as she crashed carelessly to the floor. She prayed they hadn’t seen her. Her lungs gave out immediately and she had to take huge gulps of air before letting it out again.

She knew she shouldn’t be running, that she shouldn’t be such a *coward*, but the feel of him scared the living daylights out of her. And for once she thought, *fuck Gryffindor heroics*. She had to get out. She was running out of time and all the months spent brewing such a complicated potion would all be lost. She was so close, so close to the fireplace. It was only a few feet away.

Now if only she could...

“Princess,” his sickly sweet voice sliced through the silence, dangerously close to where she was hiding. She almost fainted at the sound of it. “I know you’re in here somewhere.”

She muffled her ragged breaths with her hands.

A blue spark blasted nearby furnishings into oblivion, covering the whole place with dust and debris... then another spark exploded near her in close proximity. She forced her mouth shut at every explosion; each consecutive blast closing in on her location. He clearly found sick pleasure in scaring her like this.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are.” He sounded disturbingly happy, but there was a hint of malice in his voice somewhere.

Oh yes, he was amused alright... probably because she’d gotten this far.

She crawled to a nearby table, letting out a strained gasp as large shards of shattered glass from the explosion dug into her knees. She mouthed a string of curses under her breath.

Just a few more feet, dammit!

She could barely see anything in the dark and clouds of dust, but as long as she could see the fireplace, she would make it. Hermione mentally prepared herself for the short sprint.

3... 2... 1

She sprang from her current hiding place, straight towards her destination. Her knees were burning, but the adrenalin rush rendered her to move despite the soreness.

She had almost succeeded in her mission, but before she could even get there she agonizingly collided with something hard, like a brick wall, causing her to land on her bum with a loud thud. She squeaked at the sudden ache.

“Going somewhere?” said a bored voice. He said it so nonchalantly, as though she hadn’t just destroyed half the Manor in a matter of minutes.

She dared look up to find Draco towering over her, looking like a dark knight in the dim of the sitting room. He was twice as intimidating from her position on the floor. His face showed his usual impassive expression, but oddly, it wasn’t as cold.

It wasn’t as cold?

“—Oh dear, Lady Malfoy—”

“—Is she alright—”

The maids gathered near the door, staring at her in worry.

“You can all head back to work now,” he told the maids with a calm smile on his face. They all swooned, captivated by his devious charms. It was only then that Hermione realized that he had them all wrapped around his finger. “I’ll be handling it from here.”

As soon as they had left, his angelic smile dropped and his stoic gaze fell on her again.

“Well?”

She shivered at his brutal scrutiny, feeling helpless and vulnerable.

“I have to finish the Denovorum,” she muttered, staring at her lap.

“And so you decided to destroy the Manor to get there?”

“It’s not as if you’re just going to let me go if I asked you!” she muttered hotly.

He chuckled, as if he found the whole thing comical.

“I might have, Princess. If you just asked me. *Nicely*,” he hinted. She stared at him in shock, only to find him eyeing her with a predatory glance. She suddenly felt conscious of what she looked like.

Good Godric, this was embarrassing.

She winced when she tried to stand and move her legs. The temporary numbness she’d felt while running had vanished and now she could feel all the pain again.

He let his eyes trail down to the red gash on her knee and his face darkened. He took a step forward, his jaw tense, and she inched back with her elbows.

He let out an exasperated sigh and squatted down next to her.

Without warning, he pulled the glass shard that was sticking out of her skin. She cried out in the pain, blinking back tears.

“That hurt, you daft git!”

“Serves you right for being so stubborn,” he hissed angrily. “Tell me one good reason why I should let you finish that potion after this little stunt you pulled,” he muttered darkly, his tone losing its previous playfulness. She inched further away from him.

She knew what that sinister look on his face meant.

He wouldn’t have any of it, though. He knelt down and pulled her legs onto his lap, carefully examining her wound. It looked pretty bad. Blood was pouring out of raw skin, dripping on his robes and on the carpeted floor. “Go on, Princess. Enlighten me.”

His feather touches on her knee sent shivers down her spine. She was thankful that the sitting area was somewhat dim; he wouldn’t see her blushing like a bloody school girl.

“Because I promised Dennis,” she grunted, ignoring the blasted butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

She could practically hear him sneer.

“That’s the best you can come up with? Really?” He swatted her hand away when she tried to touch her bleeding cut. He grabbed his wand from his robes and started muttering spells she didn’t know. He was healing her and he was surprisingly gentle. Hermione stared in admiration as he worked on her wound in concentration. “Unlike you, love, I don’t exactly care if he dies.”

Hermione glared at him and smacked him on the arm. He snorted a laugh.

“Git,” she said in aggravation.

“No other reason, Granger?” He clucked his tongue, faking disappointment. “Too bad for Creevey then. I suppose we’ll have to celebrate his death.”

He moved to stand and haul her up. Her wand emitted red sparks for the third time.

“Wait—!” Hermione said, grabbing the fabric of his robes in desperation. “Fine! I’ll do anything— just take me to my office now, Draco! Please!”

Hermione held a tiny bottle over a large cauldron with trembling fingers, trying her best to drop just the right amount of Dragon blood into the bronze-colored bubbling potion. This was a delicate process and such needed caution and complete concentration. If she spilled even a single drop than what was necessary, the Denovorum would be ruined.

Unfortunately, a pair of stormy grey orbs were currently distracting her with much deep staring.

He was seated on a stool — an ordinary wooden stool — but with him sitting on it, it might as well have been a throne. She couldn’t understand why everything Draco Malfoy touched always seemed to turn to gold.

“Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“That! All the—the staring.”

He blinked a few times and continued devouring her with his eyes, not bothering to reply. It was like talking to a statue. She groaned in annoyance and turned her back on him angrily.

But it didn’t work because she could still feel him burning a hole at the back of her skull.

“Ugh! Can’t you just wait in the Manor until I get back?” she said in exasperation.

She heard movement behind her and before she could turn around, strong, muscular arms wrapped around her waist.

She shuddered and felt completely aware of the warmth behind her, his hard chiseled body pressing up against hers.

“Why?” he whispered very close to her ear, an arrogant smirk gracing his features. “Distracted?”

“Yes—I...” she started to say but she caught herself and elbowed him on the stomach. “No.”

He took the glass container from her and her skin tingled at the feel of his hand on hers. He held the bottle over the cauldron just as she had a while ago, only his hand wasn’t shaking as hers had. With complete ease, he poured the liquid substance into the potion perfectly. Hermione watched in awe as the tiny drops of dragon blood swirled and disappeared into the potion.

“See... it’s that easy darling,” he said arrogantly.

Hermione glared up at him and elbowed him again, harder this time.

“Ow,” he said half-heartedly. His laughter reverberated in her ears and Hermione felt at ease, hearing such a genuine laugh from him. “Muggle tactics again, Granger? It’s not very lady-li—”

She wrenched herself quickly away from Draco when she heard the door open. Draco glared at her. She smiled at him apologetically.

“Hermione, I’m so glad you’re here! You wouldn’t believe what I’ve just seen—!”

Padma’s words died in her throat as soon as she noticed a glaring Draco standing very close to Hermione. Hermione ignored him and directed all her attention to Padma. She gave Padma a small smile.

“Ignore him. You were saying?”

Padma was still gawking at Draco, who was now toying with one of Hermione’s curly locks, not even acknowledging the new presence.

“Padma?”

“I—Oh yes—” she said, snapping out of her thoughts and staring at Hermione. “Astoria’s back.”

Hermione felt Draco tense beside her abruptly. His face was unreadable, but she knew he was resisting—resisting the hunger, the urge to kill again.

She felt his cold fury coursing through her veins, suffocating her.

Hermione held his hand tight in worry, trying to calm him down. Draco stared at her blankly. She was the only person who could do this — have rage abandon him and leave him unaware. Her touch was fire.

Somehow, she miraculously soothed him with just a single gaze.

Hers was a subtle force... but a powerful force nonetheless. He hadn't know what to call it then, but now he knew it to be *love*.

He turned his head to Padma and gave her one of his *deceivingly* genuine smiles.

"Tell Greengrass I said hi," he said darkly, smirking again. "I'd simply *love* to see her."

Hermione did not like the hidden malice underneath in Draco's words.

"Are you two—?" Padma started to say.

"Yes, we're engaged, aren't we, love?" Draco replied, kissing the back of her hand. She stared at him with wide eyes and felt her whole body suddenly becoming rigid.

"She's just shy about the whole thing, isn't it adorable?" Draco told Padma. He pecked her on the lips but she was still in a state of shock to even react. Padma's face brightened.

"Oh my, that's brilliant!" She giggled hysterically, looking at the both of them like some sort of crazed fan girl. "Wait till I tell every—"

"Oh no, don't tell them yet," Draco winked at her. "It'll be our little secret, eh?"

'Our little secret' apparently meant everyone in the bloody building knowing about it.

The next day when she had arrived at work (She had somehow convinced him to allow her to keep going to work as long as she vowed not to destroy the Manor), everyone had been staring at her... and *whispering*.

While Hermione was already used to all the staring because of her part in the war and her engagement to Viktor Krum, this was an entirely different situation.

They were coming up to her and giving her their congratulations and hugs.

"...lways knew you two would end up together..."

"...All those years of sexual frustration..."

"...wonder what your kids would look like..."

Merlin! Make it stop!

Last night, while they had been lying in bed holding each other (after their *passionate rendezvous*), she had asked him why he had told Padma about their 'relationship.'

"*She seemed like she's the type who won't shut up about it,*" he had said before falling asleep. Hermione resisted the urge to pull all her hair out and kill herself. Now everyone knew! Ignoring the people who kept asking her about Draco, she continued to her office.

When she finally reached it, she found Ginny seated on one of the chairs.

“Hermione,” she said when she saw her. She stood up and gave her a friendly hug.

“Please don’t tell me you’re here to congratulate me on my engagement,” Hermione whined.

“Engagement?” Ginny asked in confusion. “Oh, you’re talking about Malfoy then. No, it’s more serious than that, I’m afraid.”

“What’s going on?”

“I came to tell you someone’s been trying to break into the Department of Magical Research and Development, the underground passages you lot have been trying to protect.”

Hermione stared at her in disbelief. The SFOWW was heavily vaulted and guarded with many deadly curses and charms that could kill a person just by a single stare. Then there lay the issue of the objects stored within the vaults themselves. Even if someone had managed to break through the locks, there was still a matter of the actual content.

Those artifacts had been vaulted for a reason.

“I just wanted to tell you personally,” Ginny said in concern. “We’re working on it, me and Harry... and Luna, too. Your job’s dangerous. And with Greengrass back... Just be on your guard, yeah?” She touched her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. And then she headed out the office.

Once Hermione was alone, she couldn’t help but sense a gnawing feeling in her chest. An image of Draco staring at the vault-like doors flashed in her mind.

She had found him staring at it months ago, she remembered.

And if there was anyone who could break in through that high level security, it was him.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

We’re almost at the end :(((A few more chapters. I have made my decision. I know what the ending will be lovelies. Thank you for all the suggestions.

From here on, prepare for some twists and turns.

You have to trust me :)

So this chapter... let me know what you think :)

Chapter 12

I procrastinated. I was suppose to have this out a week ago, but I procrastinated. :O

And I had homework. Lots and lots of homework...

Warning : Slightly dark themes. Slightly.

Cheers to my beta, Pooja (murtagh799). Thank you for being so amazing. Drop by her page and send her my love :p

I cannot thank you guys enough for the love you have given this story. Please take these noodles. I added sugar and syrup and my undying love on them.

And to April who made an amazing poem for HBHE, thank you. If you guys want to read her poem, check my links area.

For a better understanding of this chapter, please reread chapter 4.

First line comes from Norwegian Wood by Haruki Murakami. One of my favorite books. I highly recommend it.

Alright. Read away :)

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

“I know these things. I’m always right. It’s got nothing to do with logic: I just feel it. For example, when I get really close to you like this, I’m not the least bit scared.

Nothing dark or evil could ever tempt me.”

Dennis had been rushed to the hospital. His condition had consistently been worsening. When Hermione came to visit him at St. Mungo's, she found him lying on the hospital bed, looking tired and restless. Beside his bed, she found a bunch of kids on the floor busy making get well soon cards.

She decided to stay for the whole day and forget about going to work. Madam Dumass wouldn't mind, she knew. Dumass had known Dennis as an intern in the DMDR and held high respects for the boy.

To get a job in the Department of Magical Research and Development, you had to be rather clever. It was a *requirement*. Even the position of an intern was coveted and extremely difficult to land. Dennis had made it in so easily, a tribute to his brilliant mind. He had wanted to be an Unexhibitible, just like her.

Since the last time she had seen him, nothing had changed in his physical appearance. He was still as thin and as pale, but somehow he seemed weaker. It may not have been physically visible, but she could tell by observing the way he moved or the way he talked. The energy was being drained out of him.

And he was desperately trying to hide it from her.

“Alright, go on, what’s going on between you and Mr. Draco?” he asked all of a sudden.

She shifted uncomfortably and looked anywhere but his eyes. “What’s there to tell? It’s not really all that interesting.”

She tried to change the topic of their conversation, but Dennis was persistent. He bribed her into telling him, using his cute little puppy eyes that made her heart melt. He even *pouted*.

So eventually, she told him everything.

He patiently listened the entire time she ranted, blabbered, and shouted: about Draco and how she had fallen madly in love with him. She told him about all the people he had murdered. She told him all the conflicting emotions she was feeling about herself, things she couldn’t interpret or make sense of.

“I understand what you’re going though,” he said.

“What should I do?” she asked, sighing. “It really is complicated to love a psychopath.”

He scratched the back of his head, thinking.

“I agree with Luna Lovegood on this one,” he said, suddenly. “You should fix him.”

“And let him get away with all the crimes he committed?” she exclaimed incredulously. “Just let him get away?”

“Not really,” he pursed his lips.

“What are you saying?”

“Well... to be unloved for almost your entire life... isn’t that punishment enough?”

She stopped, feeling her breath hitch. It really was horrible, wasn’t it? Love was a huge part of life. To live without it... she couldn’t even begin to imagine.

“That still doesn’t excuse the fact that he’s killed people.”

“Because he was brainwashed into thinking it was right,” he said as a matter of fact. “It was forced into his brain, despite his constant struggle to avoid it. You shouldn’t be so unforgiving. I mean, he suffered in the hands of the Dark Lord and he still knows how to feel and love? Sounds pretty noble, if you ask me.”

She stared at her lap, contemplating her current predicament. She was still very unsure of herself.

“You have to set things right, Healer Granger,” Dennis told her in encouragement.

“I don’t know if I can do it,” she admitted, grinning sheepishly.

He slapped her hand lightly and laughed. “What are you saying? Of course you can!” he said with such determination in his face, it was really contagious. “You’re Hermione Granger, remember?”

Talking to Dennis had always made her feel better.

By the time Hermione had returned to the Manor, it was already dark.

The entire time she’d spent in the hospital, she had decidedly maintained a smile on her face. She hadn’t let her emotions slip, not even once—else she would burst into tears. She had made sure to only show Dennis her enthusiastic and happy demeanor. It was just too sad seeing Dennis in his condition, so weak and fragile. She didn’t want him to know she was breaking apart inside because of it.

That was one of the many things she had learned from him. Dennis was a quiet soul, not in the literal sense, but he was quiet in a way that he kept his emotions buried deep inside of him. He didn’t let other people see the sad side.

He was always smiling, always happy.

But sometimes the ones who always seem so happy are the saddest of them all, suffering at their core.

She shook her head and brushed the miserable thoughts aside. She was going to finish the Denovorum and save him. She shouldn’t think otherwise.

She decided to investigate the Manor and look for clues that might help her understand Draco’s motives. She had to trust her instincts. She had to stop him, whatever it was he was planning.

She knew she shouldn’t be thinking of him so cruelly, but somehow it always invaded her mind like some infectious disease. She replayed their conversation at the entrance of SFOWW a few months previous in her head over and over again. Draco had been so nonchalant in the way he had spoken back then, so uncaring. As if he hadn’t been serious at all.

“I think it’s quite obvious, isn’t it?” he said mockingly. “I’m staring at this door intensely.”

“Yes, but why?” Hermione asked as she neared him, her wand aimed at the back of his skull. He remained immobile. “You’re not planning to go in there, are you?”

He shrugged.

“Perhaps I am.”

She couldn’t believe she had ignored such an important conversation for all these months.

Draco never joked about such things. He had always been true to his words. He was indeed trying to break into the underground vaults.

But why?

She opted to start investigating in the Malfoy Family Library first, because Draco spent most of his time there, but one of the maids had stopped her and told her she had a guest waiting for her in the sitting room.

Wondering who it could be at this time, she walked towards the sitting room to find a man facing the large glass window. He looked rather tall and skinny from her vantage point at the door. His hair was long and black, elegantly tied back with a bow. His robes looked impeccable and expensive, she could tell, even with his back turned.

“Ah, Ms. Granger,” he whispered in a strained voice as he noticed her standing by the doorway. “Ve meet again.”

She suddenly felt a dreadful chill crawling up her skin. She touched her wand placed inside her robes, in case something unpleasant happened.

He turned around and allowed her to have a good look of his shadowed appearance. Hermione’s eyes widened at the sight of it. There were huge burn marks on the left side—red and blotchy marks—covering half of his face.

“I’m sorry,” she said in confusion. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

His smile widened and he took leisurely steps towards her.

“You mean you don’t remember me?” he replied, sounding somewhat disappointed. But Hermione had a feeling he wasn’t disappointed at all. “Ve met about a year ago.”

She carefully studied his face, examining all the angles and features—from the darkness of his eyes, to the thinness of his lips. Now that he’d mention it, he did seem familiar. But she couldn’t remember where she’d seen him.

“I take it Draco Malfoy hadn’t shown you the darkness he hides in the last room of the third wing corridor of the infamous Malfoy Manor?” he asked mockingly. Yet, she felt it was more of a statement. “Such a shame.”

“Third wing corridor?” she asked. “Why? What’s in there?”

“Why don’t you go have a look?” He smiled. “Aren’t you the new Lady Malfoy now?”

Alarm bells rang in her head almost instantly. *Who was this man? How did he know about her marriage to Malfoy?*

“I’m sorry I can’t seem to remember. Mr—?”

“Vasil. Vasil Krum.”

Vasil Krum.

Without warning, a chain of broken memories flashed before her eyes when the name fell upon her ears. She braced herself, cupping her throbbing head with her hands, shutting her eyes tight at the vicious headache that was caused by the immediate return of her once forgotten memories. She had known this man.

He was Viktor’s uncle.

“You survived the fire—”

A loud bang startled her and before she could do anything else. Suddenly she found herself trapped in the sitting room, all doors and windows securely barricaded.

“Yes Ms. Granger,” his voice was getting louder. His eyes were burning as he stared at her. “I survived. I’m the only one.”

“I’m sorry about—”

“Sorry? You think that little insignificant little word can save you now? You will pay dearly for this, Hermione Granger. I have come back to make sure of it!” he yelled loudly, dropping whatever friendly attitude he had shown not moments prior. His face looked almost bestial in its rage. “You little bitch! My whole family! My whole family died because of you! The fire! The engagement party! Everything was your fault!”

She was dodging him as he threw heaps and heaps of curses at her. Dark curses. Her heart raced in her chest but she forced herself to remain calm.

“I’m sorry—” she said, blinking back tears. “I didn’t know!”

A green light missed her by a few inches. She dove beside the couch to shield herself.

She wanted to scream. Her head felt like it was being hammered repeatedly.

From all around her, jets of light blasted all the furnishings. Glasses shattered and furniture smashed to pieces. In these times of danger, her mind had always been her ticket to safety. But she right now couldn’t think straight.

“How could you live with yourself knowing what you’ve done! You killed them!”

She had to get out of here.

He started shouting curse words in Bulgarian. In his rage, Vasil Krum wasn’t even trying to hit her anymore. He was going mad, destroying everything within his line of vision, sending dark curses everywhere.

Hermione groaned as more memories came back to haunt her.

The only thing she could think to do now was to attack him from behind. She was prepared to do it, too, despite her lack of skill in Defense Against the Dark Arts. She would not let herself die trying to hide.

She thrust herself out of her hiding place and gripped her wand tight.

“—YOU KILLED THEM ALL, HERMIONE GRANGER! YOU KILLED THEM ALL!” he roared just as she was about to attack him. “MURDERER!”

She cringed at what she had heard, losing her momentum. His cruel words stabbed her in the heart and twisted her insides. *Murderer.*

That was the only opening he had needed. He had disarmed her before she could even put up a fight, causing her wand to fly a few feet away from her.

The next thing she felt was pain... unbearable, agonizing pain.

She had never been hit with a Cruciatus Curse that was so full of savage fury and spite, so much hatred. She felt as if her skull was breaking and her skin was slowly being peeled off

her body. The pain was so all-consuming that she had temporarily forgotten who she was and why she was here.

She was screaming, but the voice sounded like it didn't belong to her. As if she was detached from her body and she was only an outsider who was listening. She wanted the screams of torture to stop. She wanted the pain to stop.

But she had deserved this, in a way. He was right. This—Everything was her fault.

And she kept thinking that she just deserved to die.

But that would be such a cowardly way out now, wouldn't it? *Dying*. Disappearing from the world. What would happen then? All the suffering would be gone and she would finally be at peace?

Just a green light... *and silence*. It would be so easy...

But who would take care of Draco if she went away? He wasn't like Dennis who had his mother and father and little sister, like Harry who had Luna and the Weasleys. He had no one else besides her. He had no other family. She couldn't...

She couldn't leave Draco behind.

She willed herself to stay conscious, shutting her eyes tight and trying to forget the pain being inflicted on her. She ignored his cruel laughter as it rippled through the room. She forced herself to roll over, using both hands to hoist herself off the ground. And then with all the energy she had left, she summoned her wand.

She blasted him to the stone wall before he could say anything else.

And then she collapsed to the ground.

She couldn't feel any part of her body anymore. For a long time all she could do was stare at the ceiling blankly — or maybe it hadn't really been so long — maybe it only felt that way. She lay there motionless until a blurred silhouette of a man appeared, leaning over her crippled form.

“Fuck—Princess— Hold on.”

She couldn't make out his features, but his touch was familiar. She would know that gentle, affectionate touch anywhere.

“You're here,” she said hoarsely, smiling at him. His presence was enough to calm her nerves; she wasn't scared... not anymore.

“Shhh...” he said, tending to her wounds. She leaned in his touch. The pain was slowly dulling away. She was pretty sure it wouldn't come back. She could suffer for so long but his touch would always make her feel better again.

He had such gentle hands.

“What did he do, Princess?” he whispered softly, leaning his head to her ear, caressing her gently.

She focused her eyes on him, suddenly feeling his cold fury flood into her system. She shifted in his arms uncomfortably.

From the corner of her eyes, she could see Vasil Krum stirring and trying to get on his feet, but she paid him no mind. He was the one in danger here now, not her.

“It—it doesn’t—it doesn’t matter,” she started. To prove her point, she pulled away from him and tried her best to stand. “I’m fine now.”

Her injured leg shook beneath her and she staggered a little. But she managed to hold onto his robes before she fell down again. He was staring down at her blankly once more, letting his eyes roam around her disheveled appearance. She stared back. Brown mixed with grey. She did not like what she saw. His features were cold... dead.

“Don’t—”

A green light flashed from the tip of his wand before she could stop him.

“It matters to me.”

Things couldn’t get worse than this.

Nothing could have prepared her for that cruelty, to see the light disappear from someone’s eyes. It was a darkness she wanted to erase from her mind.

She was running.

Where to, she didn’t know... All she did know was that she had to keep running. She could feel him trailing after her and calling out her name again and again. She wanted him to go away.

But she also wanted to hold him, hold him tight and never let him go.

Such a cruel thing it was, to be with someone you both hopelessly despise and love.

“Wait—” she heard him call out. “Princess—”

“Leave me alone, Draco!” she screamed, her voice bouncing off the cold walls.

“I did it because he was going to kill you!” he shouted back, angrily. She walked faster but it really didn’t matter, because no matter how fast she walked, he would easily catch up. He was already nearing her. “I saw it in his eyes. The way he looked at you—”

“I don’t fucking care!” she howled, giving him a hard shove and walking away again. “You could have stunned him and just sent him to Azkaban. You shouldn’t—You shouldn’t have—”

Murderer.

The words died in her throat and she continued to walk angrily, stomping her feet one after the other.

Draco persistently followed her. He wasn’t sure what to say, what she wanted to hear. He didn’t really want to say he was sorry for killing Krum. It had just happened. He had lost

control the moment he saw her lying half-dead on the ground.

She had been tortured, almost to the brink of insanity. How she had survived it, he did not know. He had mistakenly killed the bastard in front of her. He couldn't help himself. He had just been so angry.

"Your lack of regard for your own well-being astounds me, Granger," he hissed, his voice a harsh whisper. "When are you going to understand that I'm not—and will never—feel at ease as long as there are people out there who want to kill you? Why do you think I so adamantly forced you to stay here in the Manor? Granger!"

He grabbed her arm roughly and pulled her towards him. "It's not just because I wanted you here Princess, It's to keep you safe as well. The Death Eaters despise you for being a muggleborn and being married to me. They think you're a disgrace to the name of the Malfoys and to the Dark Lord. They want you gone. *They want to take you away from me—*"

She shoved past him angrily and continued on her way.

"Where are you going?" he called after her.

Hermione continued to walk till she reached the staircases towards the third wing corridor. She had climbed the steps as quickly as she could in her exhausted state. Finally she reached the last door, the one Vasil Krum had mentioned a while ago.

She turned around swiftly, facing him full on.

"Hermione," Draco said, his voice laced with spite. He gave her a warning glance, telling her he was going to do something extremely nasty if she continued.

"What's behind this door?" she asked boldly, daring him to come closer.

His hand angrily moved to draw his wand but as soon as Hermione saw this, she pinned her back against the solid surface and reached for the knob behind her. He froze.

"Don't—"

"Tell me what's in here!" she screamed, tears streaming down her face. Her whole body was trembling again. The pent up anger she was feeling threatened to burst.

"Step away—"

"TELL ME!" The words burst from her mouth. She turned the knob behind her.

A soft creaking sound reverberated.

"Fine! I'll tell you!" he roared suddenly. His eyes roamed down to her ribs. She noticed the concerned way he looked at her, the worry in his voice; even though his face was still the same empty canvas. "Just— just come here and step away from the door."

And then Hermione felt, for the second time in that day, the sensation of pain invading her mind.

"I—I—no—you're lying—" she said, desperately tugging her hair.

Where was all the heavy breathing coming from? Was it from her lungs? She retreated, feeling her chest tighten and constrict. The memories kept coming back, pouring into her

brain like hot molten lava.

Physical pain was better than this.

“Princess, are you—”

There was too much noise. *Noise everywhere*. But no one was making a sound. It was her own thoughts producing the clamor. She was thinking so many things at once. She wanted to stop thinking.

A deafening sound, the sound of madness.

“Hermione!”

Hermione? Yes, that was her name wasn't it?

She looked to find him standing only a few feet away, with his hand outstretched, reaching for her. She stared at his outstretched hand, and then at him.

Draco?

Yes, he was here, he would keep her safe.

“I promise I'll tell you,” he said in a sort of strained way that almost sounded like he was pleading. “Just close the door and come here, Princess.”

“Y-you—you promise?” she whispered, shakily. Her voice was so foreign to her ears.

“Yes. Yes, I promise. *Trust me.*”

She kept staring at him, staring into his soul, trying to find a semblance of even the tiniest lie. But his face was sincere. He was real and he was really trying to help...

She reached for him, and once she had touched his hand, he pulled her to his chest. He had pulled so hard that they had collapsed to the ground, but he didn't care. His body cushioned her fall. He let her lie on the cold floor, pillowng her head with his arm. Her vision blurred and stirred.

It was only then that she had noticed the blood leaking from her side. The last thing she felt was his strong arm around her and the gentleness of his voice.

“I'm here. Don't worry.”

Hermione opened her eyes to find that she was in their room again. Alone.

She stared at the curtains of the four poster bed for a good five minutes, trying to remember what had happened before she had fainted out cold. She eventually remembered everything. Vasil Krum. How he died. *Everything*.

And she had almost lost her mind.

She got out of bed and drifted out of their room, her mind wandering off with each step. She needed to relax, to think of something else. A good book never failed to help her with that.

She had passed numerous rooms until she reached the library. It was enormous and beautiful. She could understand why Draco spent most of his time here. It was peaceful. She traced the spines of the old books, inhaling their unique scent.

“Looking for something?” drawled an all too familiar voice from behind her.

Her heart leapt from her chest and she quickly turned to the source of the sound. Her eyes turned to saucers at the sight of him, a thin man with sallow skin and a large, hooked nose. He had shoulder-length, greasy black hair which framed his face in curtains. His cold, black eyes resembled dark tunnels. He had a thin-lipped, sneering mouth.

Her old headmaster and Potions teacher was hanging on the wall.

“Professor Snape?” she asked in disbelief.

“Why Ms. Granger,” he said in his usual soft icy tone. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

She stared at him a little longer with her jaw hanging open, letting her brain process the weirdness of the situation.

“Tell me, are you always this impolite?”

Hermione snapped out of her musings and closed her mouth. “I’m sorry—it’s just been so long,” she told the man sheepishly.

“There,” Snape said, ignoring her previous statement. He was pointing to his left. “At the left bookshelf. The third binding.”

Hermione’s features scrunched in confusion. “Sorry?”

Snape looked at her again. This time his dark tunnels held a condescending tinge in them, as though he was mocking her for doing something completely stupid.

“That is the second time you’ve asked such an inane question, Ms. Granger,” he said, sneering. “Obviously, I’m trying to show you something—if you aren’t as big a dunderhead I have assumed you to be.”

Hermione resisted the urge to burn the portrait right then and there. She couldn’t believe Snape was still unbelievably annoying, *even in portrait form*.

She looked at the object he was so keenly pointing at, a black book that was squished between two thick ones. She pulled it out from its place on the shelf and stared at it in mild curiosity. When she opened it, she saw nothing but the initials LM on the bottom left page.

“Page one hundred and twenty four,” Snape told her.

It was frighteningly akin to the first time she’d been in his Potions class.

As soon as she turned to that page she saw the elegant handwriting of LM, whoever it was.

...My wife and I had watched as the Dark Lord trained him in the most brutal way possible. I have to admit, it was a bit painful to watch my son go through hell, but I’d reminded myself that such was necessary for him to attain full power. Sometimes he would use the Cruciatus Curse over and over again until he was left unconscious. Sometimes he would

use dark curses that would physically injure his body. We watched him get hundreds of lashes a day and even get his bones broken and regrown painfully, just so he could break them again...

“Good Godric,” she said, at a loss of words.

Many images came to mind, of Draco lying on some cold dungeon floor, half-dead, as Voldemort tortured him to the brink of madness. And to make things worse, Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy had been there. He and his wife had *watched* as a raging psychopath tortured their only son.

...He often messed with my son's mind and pried into his innermost thoughts... He told Draco that it was important that he lost all feeling and emotions.

Lucius had been wrong here. She felt somewhat relieved as she read this, knowing Voldemort hadn't succeeded in taking all emotion away from Draco. He had clung to them tightly. Despite all else, he still remained human.

He hadn't let Voldemort completely destroy him.

In these moments of torture and pain, I have never been so proud...

Hermione suddenly found it hard to breathe, like her lungs had somehow tightened, refusing to let the air out. Her breaths came in short huffs. A nauseating feeling plagued her stomach, and she felt a growing need to throw up. Her surroundings spun around her. She felt the journal slip through her fingers. And then she allowed herself to collapse to the cold floor, hugging her knees tightly.

A bitter chuckle left her throat.

“Draco, you bloody idiot,” she whispered to no one in particular. It was only then that she'd noticed the hot tears flowing down her cheeks. She wiped them roughly with her hands. “You stupid, stupid—”

“You are disgustingly like Potter,” Snape said, eyeing her crouched form in revulsion. “Fools who wear their hearts proudly on their sleeves, who cannot control their emotions, who wallow in sad memories and allow themselves to be provoked this easily—”

“I can't even imagine how he—” Another sob escaped her lips. She couldn't help it, knowing what Draco had gone through...

“I don't expect you to really understand how Draco had survived months of physical, mental and emotional torture, without turning into the monstrosity the Dark Lord had wanted him to be.”

Voldemort hadn't succeeded into completely turning Draco into a monster, but nevertheless, the damage was done. And the effect was this, Draco's merciless personality. Cold blooded murderer. Hermione stared at her old professor. She felt so horrible now. She shouldn't have let this faze her. It was bound to happen.

She was supposed to be fixing this, fixing him. Not running away from him.

She wanted to hex herself for giving up on him so easily. Luna had been counting on her. Draco had been counting on her too, albeit unconsciously.

She had almost let them down.

“Draco’s just that strong-willed and brilliant,” she said quietly, wiping her tearstained face again. “I’ve almost forgotten what he’s capable of. I know he’s not a monster. I do believe in him. If anything he should have been in Gryffin—”

“Clearly, you are mistaken,” Snape said, scornfully. Hermione groaned loudly; her cheeks flushed red in outrage.

“You don’t think he’s brave enou—?”

“It was because of you, you insufferable know-it-all,” he said before she could even blurt out more unfriendly words. “Bravery had nothing to do with this, Ms. Granger. He had survived the Dark Lord’s torture simply because of you.”

His words stunned her. She felt her breath suddenly freeze in her chest, smothering her.

“I—I don’t think—”

“I know my Godson and his disgusting delusions. Yes, he is not a monster. But he will be if you don’t change him. The whole world’s counting on you, Ms. Granger. You’re the only one who can do this. If you ever fail at the task at hand, you will be very sorry indeed.”

“Can I come in?”

Hermione stood anxiously outside the cold halls of the Manor, waiting for him to answer. She hadn’t seen him since she had woken up. She really didn’t know what to tell him now. She didn’t know how she could convince him to stop taking lives. But she had to try to sway him somehow.

Finally, the doors to his study opened quietly. She sighed in relief. Feeling her heart race, she took a deep breath and counted to ten.

She stepped into the study and saw him at his desk, reading through a bunch of paper work. He didn’t look up when she entered.

She fidgeted and stared at the floor uneasily. *This was ridiculous. Why couldn’t she just say it?*

“Draco I’m—”

He looked up from what he was reading, placing his elbows on the table and resting his chin on his interlaced fingers. He was waiting for her to talk and apologize. She glared at him for being such an arrogant bastard.

“Thanks for saving me.”

“Twice,” he added to annoy her. She groaned.

“Thanks for saving me twice.”

She could feel him smirking the entire time. She resisted the urge to hex him to oblivion. Then leaned in his chair and patted his lap, a small gesture telling her he wanted her to sit

there.

“Come here.”

She visibly swallowed and stayed where she was, eyeing him suspiciously.

“Princess—” he warned, making her jump. *What are you doing, Hermione? You’re supposed to be fixing him! Don’t be such a bloody coward!*

She walked towards him stiffly, hesitating for a moment. And then, very carefully, she sat on his lap.

She had been with him for so long now, but being so close to him still sent electric jolts all through her body. All of a sudden, he grabbed her by the collar roughly, pulling her very close to his face. All she could do was struggle out of his tight grip, but he kept her steady.

“You almost opened a black hole,” he whispered, seething.

“What?” She stared at him in utter shock.

“A black hole, Princess. That room you almost entered had a black hole inside it,” he hissed. “You scared the shit out of me.”

So it’s true. She had read somewhere that the Malfoy Manor had a black hole hidden within its very walls. However, the book she’d read also stated that it was merely a myth and nothing more.

Black holes are dark portals to nothingness. She could have been instantly killed.

“Good Godric.”

“If you ever do this again, if you even think about stepping into that black hole or killing yourself, you’ll be sorry,” he said in pure rage. She’d never seen him so angry.

She nodded stiffly.

Convinced, he let go of her collar and stared in space. The awkwardness between them returned. She didn’t know what to do.

“Look I’m sorry. I panicked. I won’t do it again, but I just want you to promise you’ll stop —*murdering people.*”

He was silent for a moment, lost in thought, tracing her back with the tip of his fingers. Her skin tingled again. She couldn’t read his face this time.

“That’s it?” he said quietly. “You want me to stop killing?”

Hermione stared at her lap nervously, afraid of what his answer might be.

“Yes,” she muttered under her breath. “Forever.”

She was ready for him, ready for the blunt rejection he was going to give her. She had prepared long before he could even answer.

“Okay.”

She almost fell off his lap in surprise.

“W-what? You’re sure?” She was completely amazed.

“For you, yes.”

She allowed herself to stare at those beautiful grey orbs, cherishing the sight of him.

She wasn’t entirely sure if she should believe him. He was a master liar, after all, cunning in his ways. But she couldn’t stop herself. It was an odd sensation she felt in her gut. She felt that she should trust him completely this time. She hugged him tight before more words were said.

Draco was always true to his words.

“So that’s what I have to do to get you to listen to me,” she joked. “I’ll only have to be suicidal—”

His expression turned gloomy in a blink of an eye. Hermione recoiled, unused to the sight of pure melancholy staring at her straight in the face. She had never seen him like this; his defenses lowered enough for her to see how sad he was.

“It’s not—” He paused, sighing exasperatedly. “It’s not funny.”

She could see him now. *Draco*. Not the monster that Voldemort had created, but the human being she had learned to love. She wanted to hold him and never let him go, so she did just that. She wrapped her arms around him again, letting him know she was not going anywhere.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I don’t want you to die,” he said so dejectedly, it broke her heart. “If you die, I won’t make it, Princess.”

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Black holes — are dark portals to nothingness. There aren’t really any black holes in cannon. I just added it here.

Snape in portrait form — because he was in portrait form, I have taken most of his dialogue from cannon :)

Uh... what else... nothing.

I just hope I hear from you, you wonderful people.

Chapter 13

Here we are, finally. After what? A month? I know, I'm lazy and I suck so just slap me. :))))

Beta-ed by Pooja (murtagh799), who helped me with my grammar and prepositions and phrases, even though I sometimes make the same mistakes over and over again. Drop by her page and send her my love.

I heard this story was nominated in Dramione Awards. I'm so overwhelmed and happy. Thank you so much.

Pottermore anyone? My username's QuillSpirit135.

Thank you for the wonderful reviews and support. *Hay nako*, I've run out of recipes, so just take my heart with you.

First line comes from Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita. Very different and disturbing, but still an interesting read..

Read away :)

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

“I loved you. I was a pentapod monster but I loved you.”

Promises had never mattered to him. They were insignificant, not worth his time, or just another cunning means to an end. He'd either never cared for promises or he'd just used them to get what he'd wanted.

Draco didn't know if he could be true to his word.

He'd like to think of what had happened as a spur of the moment decision, something you would only say or do because the situation had called for it.

And with Hermione Malfoy (nee Granger) seated snuggly on his lap, looking unbelievably adorable with her soft, curly tresses and pouting lips, he had not been able to stop the words spilling from his mouth.

She wasn't aware of the amount of control she had on him. Right then, he would've willingly jumped off a cliff if she had asked him to.

He would've done anything.

Briskly, he made his way through the bookcases of the Malfoy Family Library. The library itself was strategically charmed so that no one could use magic to summon the books from

their place on the hundreds of towering bookshelves. It was meant to be some sort of security measure, to ensure that no books would ever be stolen so easily.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Blaise asked him again for what seemed to be the hundredth time that day.

Draco managed to shoot him a cold stare. Blaise merely raised an elegant brow in response.

“I said I would do it and I will,” Draco stated, feeling a headache forming. He rubbed his forehead with his hand. “I went to France for this. I’ve threaded through the libraries, the museums, and met Van Bonham himself. I ought to know what I’m doing.”

“You do realize, if everything doesn’t go accordingly to what we’ve planned,” Blaise said seriously, “We would all perish?”

“When have any of my plans ever failed, hmm?” he replied arrogantly.

“It failed with Hermione,” Blaise said with a condescending tone. Draco hated it when he used that tone. It usually meant that he was wrong and Blaise was right. It thoroughly annoyed him. “Need I remind you of your little suicide stunt five years a—”

“Shut it.” He walked to another isle of books, skimming through their titles, his footsteps echoing through the silence. “Just help me find this bloody book and shut it.”

All Draco heard was an annoyed grunt from the next isle.

He continued the torturous search, pulling the old books out of their little bookshelf homes and reading through them.

He couldn’t get his mind off of the recent incident involving Vasil Krum. He kept seeing her face before his eyes just as she was about to open the doors to a black hole. She just looked tired and hurt and miserable with life and everything about it... And he *hated* it, hated seeing her that way. Back then, when he was still as heartless as the Dark Lord himself, he wouldn’t have cared what she was feeling. It hadn’t mattered. He hadn’t cared.

Now he just wanted her to be happy.

What happened? How did it get to be like this?

To make matters worse, he couldn’t imagine what it would be like to live without Granger. The thought of living without her made him angry, nauseous, and sad all at the same time. It was a really depressing thought.

He just wanted her, and everything else distorted and blurred, literally paled in comparison.

She was taking over his life and he didn’t even mind.

“You know she almost opened the black hole,” he murmured unconsciously.

On the other side of the bookshelf, Blaise wondered questioningly, surprised at what he’d just heard. Draco rarely told him anything about his life. He was reserved about most things. He was reserved about all things.

“Yeah?” he said as casually as he could, so as to get him to keep talking. “What happened?”

“It was that bastard, Vasil Krum,” Blaise heard him say. “He survived the Fiendfyre. I have no idea how. Never knew him to be so powerful... He went to the Manor the other day. He made it inside because he had introduced himself as a guest and the maids *believed* him somehow. I bet he’d *Imperiused* them. I bet he’d been planning it a while.”

“Sweet Salazar,” Blaise said in surprise and amusement. “He was intent on revenge? He forced Hermione to open the black hole, did he?”

“She didn’t know it was a black hole, Blaise,” he continued. “Thought it was a forbidden room where I keep all things dark and illegal. She suspects I’m keeping things from her.”

“I wonder why,” Blaise replied sarcastically. He crouched to skim through the books on the lower shelf. “What happened to Krum? I bet anything you tortured him and sent him to Azkaban.”

Blaise pulled a book with an interesting title from its place and skimmed through the pages —a book of Dark Arts. He always found interesting books in the Malfoy Family Library. Shame he couldn’t borrow it for a while.

“No,” said Draco nonchalantly. “I murdered him.”

Blaise stopped skimming and closed the book with a snap. “You *murdered* him? *In front of Hermione*?”

“He was a right bastard,” Draco said, his voice was every bit emotionless. “He just tortured her and I snapped. No one can ever hurt her like that. I’ll kill anyone who says otherwise.”

There was a very small pause between them.

Blaise sighed and walked towards the end of the bookshelf while Draco was busy searching for the book. He observed the man keenly. Draco was improving, despite all this. The number of people he’d killed since he came back from France had lessened. His track record with murder had been decidedly higher in the past. Poisoning, torture, playing with his victims like little puppets tied to invisible strings — had all been part of his repertoire. All done for the fun of it.

Since he had returned from France, he’d only disposed of a few people. And the last murder, it really had only been just to protect her.

He was different now, more considerate and definitely more remorseful. He was almost the same boy he had met before he had been tortured by the Dark Lord.

All because of her.

She was really getting to him. Even now, after all the horrible things that had happened, Blaise could still feel a tiny spark of hope... hope that everything would eventually work out once this was all over.

“Found it,” Draco said, pulling another book from the shelf in triumph. He turned his head sideways and noticed him standing idly at the end of the bookshelves. “Well, don’t just stand

there, Blaise. Help me.”

Blaise scowled and lazily walked over to the book they’d been looking for. It was thick and it looked very old with dust covering its elephant skin cover.

The Book of Curses.

Draco flipped through the crisp pages and read through the text. The silence was unbearable, nerve-racking as the seconds dripped by. He shook his head finally, letting Blaise know that their assumptions had indeed been right.

He was going to have to break his promise, but she’d never have to know.

“Aren’t you going to tell me about Draco Malfoy, at all?”

Hermione Malfoy (nee Granger) closed her bright brown eyes in an attempt to keep her emotions at bay. She had to stop herself from hurling one of the cauldrons at the next person who’d dare ask that question again.

“No,” she answered, plain and simple.

“Well, why not? I’m dying to know. Cause, I reckon you’ve been having a secret love affair together since back in Hogwa—”

She tuned Padma out of her mind, as if her voice was nothing but roaring winds. She dropped two slices of Dragon skin into the Denovorum. The liquid substance swallowed it whole and she stared patiently at her watch. After five minutes, if the potion turned to silver, she would know if she had added the ingredient correctly.

“—can tell me what he’s really like in bed—”

The potion swirled and bubbled in effect, until eventually, it turned liquid silver. It was so shiny and dazzling that both women stopped and stared at it for a few minutes, seemingly hypnotized by its beauty.

“I’m going to Knockturn alley,” she announced all of a sudden. “I have to go find a Dragon Flower.”

“What? Now?” Padma said. “But it’s dangerous. Draco would surely have a fit if he found out about this.”

Ever since the Vasil Krum incident, Draco had rarely let her out of his sight. He had become somewhat paranoid. He had forbid her to go anywhere other than the Manor and the office. And if she really, really had to go somewhere, she mustn’t be alone and she always had to carry her wand at all times.

As if she even needed to be reminded of that.

“I’ll be fine, really,” Hermione insisted, rolling her eyes. “We need ashes from its fire for the last ingredient.”

“You should just ask the others to buy it for y—”

“They won’t know what a Dragon Flower is. It’s not exactly common,” she said as a matter-of-fact. “Besides, it’ll be faster if I do it. Don’t leave until I get back, alright?”

She grabbed her coat and went towards the door quickly before Padma could even think of stopping her.

“Oh and... don’t tell anyone. Especially Draco.”

Walking through the different shops in Knockturn alley was easy enough as long as she kept her head down. She had tied her hair into a messy bun once more, so no one would notice exactly who it was walking so carelessly alone.

That was the good thing about Knockturn Alley, she guessed. If you don’t pry into other people’s business, they won’t pry into yours.

Hours passed by rapidly. She spent a good amount of time entering each known shop but it was a useless endeavor.

She was about to look at the other side, but there, by the little shop at the end of the road was a little potted Dragon Flower displayed on the glass window. It looked quite lonely all by itself. She entered the shop to talk to the shop owner, an old man with a long beard, but he had only told her that the plant hasn’t sprouted fire for years. Dragon flowers were sad creatures.

She eventually had to leave empty-handed.

When she stepped outside the shop, she felt a strange flutter in her chest. Only then did she notice a lone figure across the street, leaning against a post. Her heart stopped beating for a millisecond. She caught sight of his tousled blond hair and swallowed.

He smirked and gestured for her to come closer.

She staggered towards him, feeling anxious that he had caught her disobeying his orders. He had specifically told her not to wander alone, to stay inside the office. She brushed the nervousness aside and stared at him in determination, ready to tell him that she was a grown woman who had a right to her own decisions.

There was a murderous look in his eyes and a disturbing smile on his face that gave her goose bumps. When she was finally a few inches in front of him, he wrapped the end of his long, dark scarf around her neck, covering the little space between them. It was a bit cold today and she’d forgotten to bring hers.

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

And Hermione noted in annoyance, how much his skin looked just as great as it did from a distance.

“Padma,” she said hotly.

“It wasn’t her fault, love, she just couldn’t resist my charms,” he whispered arrogantly, leaning in to meet her lips. She jumped in surprise again. She could never seem to get used to these stolen kisses. “Let’s go back.”

“Wait—” she said, pulling away from him. It was a bad move unfortunately, because his eyes turned to slits in a matter of seconds. He hated it when she did that—pull away from him. “I still have to look for a Dragon Flower.”

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten you’re not supposed to be here,” he said condescendingly, pulling her towards him again and smirking coldly. ‘I told you not to go wandering off, Princess.’ She couldn’t help but feel little butterflies flutter in her stomach. Every time he got too close, she would blush deeply (much to her embarrassment), even if he was being such a complete and utter *prat*. “You’re supposed to be safe.”

But I am safe, her thoughts told her. As long as he was with her, she was safe.

In effect, a tiny, barely-visible smile graced her lips, but he saw it anyway.

He tilted his head and stared down at her in curiosity, suddenly forgetting his anger.

He kissed her again.

“Malfoy!” she screamed at him as soon as she felt the all too sudden contact, wrenching herself away in embarrassment as people walked and stared at the two of them. *Bloody Public Display of Affection!*

“Your fault.”

“You’re *impossible*,” she muttered under her breath.

The people all around them were watching the two of them now. She’d bet him anything, it was because of his silver locks that glistened in the light.

Only the Malfoy’s had hair like that.

Suddenly, she grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the next random destination, away from more prying eyes.

He let her lead them through different shops, searching once more for that little Dragon Flower she so badly needed. She told him that if he was so paranoid about her going out alone, then he should just come looking with her. He thought it was a brilliant idea.

It didn’t matter that they hadn’t found any in the end, or that they’d walked to the point of exhaustion, till their legs were tired and sore.

Draco was enjoying himself, because all the while they were searching she never once let go of his hand.

“I can’t believe I didn’t remember this earlier,” she whispered to him in the quiet of the Potter’s sitting room, after having remembered that Luna had told her about a Dragon Flower in her back yard. “Sorry I dragged you all around Knockturn alley. We wasted a lot of time.”

He didn’t bother to reply. He just sat quietly beside her, holding her hand with his larger ones and observing the surroundings suspiciously. The Potter house wasn’t big at all. It was small and cozy, like the Burrow, but more unusual and by far more interesting.

Despite the size, it still felt like home.

It was blue—well—the wallpapers anyway. There was a fireplace, a couch, a coffee table, and a few bookcases. On the top of one of the bookcases was one of Luna's most favorite things, a hat shaped like a life-size lion's head she had worn back when she was still at Hogwarts.

"She wore that to support Gryffindor a few years back," Hermione chuckled, pointing at the hat. "She's really sweet, she is. People think she's weird but she's actually very amazing once you get to know her. We did some research together at the DMRD before she pursued becoming a naturalist."

"Why didn't you become a naturalist, then?" he said.

"Oh, I have my reasons," Hermione said thoughtfully. "I considered it, and then I considered magical law, even becoming a muggle scientist or astronomer. But in the end I settled for being an Unexhibitible. I like going on missions and inventing new potions for the sake of other people. It's the perfect job for me."

"Amusing, is it?"

"Very amusing, yeah," she continued. "Harry doesn't like it that much because it's a dangerous job, but I said it makes me happy, so he had no choice but to accept it. Best part of my job is going to different places, you know. Not just any place. The Ancient ones—places you're not normally allowed visit. I'm exempted from the laws because I'm an Unexhibitible."

"Tell me more," she heard him say. By now he had rested his chin on one hand, his elbow propped on his knee, listening in earnest. Hermione thought about all the adventures she'd had because of her job and decided to tell him about her trip to Vietnam.

"Well there was this one place, the tombs of the Wizards of Vietnam," she said, her eyes flashing brightly at the memory. "It was really dangerous and we almost died trying to translate the Ancient Runes, I even got a few scars here and there, see—" She pointed at a small scratch on her elbow. She was so passionate about her little story that she hadn't noticed she was babbling. "My other Unexhibitible friend even got bitten by a magical creature on our way out. We had to take her to the nearest hospital and heal her ourselves. The creature that had bitten her was a rare one, a magical bug. But we made it in the end. I had loads of fun and it was all worth it because we—we—uhm—"

She suddenly noticed the intense look he was giving her, like he was really interested in what she was saying. He was smirking again, amused at her story. The bored expression that was so often plastered on his face was surprisingly absent. In fact, with the way he looked at the moment, he made her feel like she was the most interesting person in the world, even though she was sure that she was considered dull by most people.

He just looked like he was genuinely fascinated with her. *Geniunely*.

"Because?" he muttered, urging her to continue.

"B-because— well we— we unlocked some hidden chambers— and you know—" she said, suddenly feeling nervous. No one had ever showed her such honest-to-Merlin interest before. Every time she would speak, people would only be half-listening, or not at all. "We did some other— uhm— things."

As if on cue, Luna arrived carrying a tray of tea in her hands. Hermione let out a breath of relief that she hadn't been aware she'd been holding.

Luna was wearing the same blinking, glowing apron again that made Draco positively raise his eyebrow.

Hermione saw this and elbowed him hard in the stomach.

"Be nice," she whispered in warning.

He only stared at the tea in front of him with obvious disgust, but he didn't say anything. That was about the nicest he could get.

"They're at the back, the Dragon flowers," Luna told them nicely. "They're currently killing the weeds with their fire, so it's best if you wait a while."

Then they were silent.

Hermione felt the awkwardness of the whole. She took the tea cup and handed it to Draco anxiously. Then she drank hers very quickly. Luna and Draco seemed oblivious to the tensed atmosphere. They were both in their own minds, contemplating different matters.

How she wished she could join them.

"It was you who warded her flat," Draco said suddenly, breaking the unbearable silence.

For a moment, Hermione wondered what he was on about.

"The Caballusi fairies," Luna replied without even thinking about it, as if she'd read his mind. "They were swarming Hermione's room so I sent them away."

"Were they really?" Draco retorted, sneering at her. "They don't exist."

"They do, of course" Luna said, seeming unfazed by his taunts and sneers. "And I think you know they do."

"I don't know what you're on about."

"Why didn't you tell everyone about the Marriage Bond, Draco Malfoy?" she said in a very gentle voice, changing the subject. "Why did you pay for the Denovorum? Why is Astoria Greengrass still alive?"

Funny, Hermione was wondering the exact same thing. Why hadn't Draco told anyone about the Bond? And he'd paid for the Denovorum as well... Hermione's eyes darted between the two of them out of curiosity.

Draco gazed upon Luna condescendingly, but didn't utter a single word. Luna stared back, her protuberant eyes never blinking. A couple of minutes went by with just the two of them eyeing each other. Draco was the first to look away.

"Ah, I think they're done now," Luna said excitedly. "I hope you don't find it weird that I've named my Dragon flowers after the two of you."

They followed her to the back door of the Potter house. Hermione took note of the other fascinating objects displayed on the walls that she'd never paid attention to, until now.

Once they reached the backyard, Hermione saw the Dragon flowers, with their moving vines, dark green leaves, and huge bear-trap mouths. And she was amazed to see that they looked nothing like the lonely Dragon Flower she had seen in the shop a while ago. These Dragon Flowers looked healthier, happier, and greener.

“Oh wow.” She was about to move closer, but Draco pulled her back by the fabric of her robes and glared at her.

She stared at him questioningly.

“They tend to sprout fire at the people they’re not familiar with,” Luna explained.

“How fascinating,” she said in amazement.

The Dragon Flowers were beautiful in real life, unlike the pictures she’d seen of them in books. No, pictures did them no justice at all.

When Luna successfully collected the right amount of ashes, a few moments later, she happily handed it to Hermione. Hermione took out a glass vial that was tied around her neck. It contained a small amount of Denovorum she had taken with her for samples. She uncorked the vial and added a pinch of ashes.

And for the first time in her life, she had successfully finished a Denovorum. The final step. The potion swirled and turned to liquid gold.

Draco was staring at Hermione the whole time her face was lighting up, admiring her loveliness... all the while Luna was observing Draco and smiling knowingly.

Luna promised to let Hermione come back to study the fascinating creatures if she had free time.

“By the way, the spell to keep the Caballusi fairies away is called Asul,” Luna told Draco serenely, who stared at her in faint appreciation... before they apparated away.

The next day, when Draco arrived at the Manor after a meeting with Pete, it was complete and utter chaos.

The maids were running around everywhere, screaming her name on the top of their lungs. All of them had panic-stricken looks on their faces.

“Young Master,” said a very worried maid who happened to notice him standing amidst all the pandemonium. “We can’t find milady anywhere. She came back hours ago, but when Bernice went up to the chambers to give her something to eat, she wasn’t there!”

“—what should we do—”

“—oh dear, what if something bad hap—”

For a moment he was disturbed, seeing a mental image of a dead rotting corpse of Hermione flash in his mind. It made his heart beat faster than normal.

Before he could reply however, a flicker of light flashed from the window, catching his attention. And that was all he needed. He had a vague idea where she might be hiding now.

He threaded through the maids gathered around him. He told them to stop looking and to relax.

Meanwhile, he went quietly up the stairs, past the beautifully decorated halls and entered their room, which he found empty. He frowned at the sight. He supposed it was because he was so used to seeing her there, that the emptiness seemed to upset him.

It hadn't bothered him so much before.

He opened the enormous closet, walked past the many clothes and dress robes until he found her seated on the corner with her knees to her chest and her hands covering her ears from the loudness of the thunderstorm.

It was all too familiar.

"You found me," she said, smiling sheepishly at him. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were watery, and she looked like she was on the verge of crying from fear.

He squatted next to her, observing the outline of her face and her body that was still visible in the dimness. Her eyes twinkled—as if they were stars sparkling in the night sky.

"I'll always find you," he whispered gently. "You won't be able to escape me even if you wanted to. I'll always find you."

There was a flash of lightning, but she was too distracted by the sight of him to notice.

"I know," she replied in a serious tone. "And I really don't want to—escape you, I mean."

The last statement surprised him. He had expected an outburst from her, or even a slap in the face. He stared dumbfounded for a few seconds, disbelief marring his aristocratic features.

He recovered from his temporary lapse, cupped her cheek with one hand, and leaned in to kiss her.

He entwined his lips with her soft ones. She tasted like honey, sweet and luscious, *irresistible*. Their tongues danced around each other's mouth. The kiss drowned them, left them breathless.

"You know, I love you," he said all of a sudden, never moving his mouth away from hers.

"You're a sodding git, Malfoy," she said, smiling against his lips. He could feel her face burning, flushing bright red. "But I love you too."

And then he held her in his arms.

They sat together contentedly, waiting for the storm to pass.

She thought she'd caught a glimpse of someone standing lazily amongst the sea of people on the dance floor.

His eyes beckoned to her in the most tempting way—her good-looking husband clad in dark robes with an air of mystery surrounding him.

Something swam in those silver orbs, something different, as if he was waiting for something to happen. Hermione wanted to go up to him and ask him what was bothering him, but the spell between them was once again broken. Draco disappeared in the crowd again, probably mingling with other people.

Hermione observed the lobby of the Department of Magical Research and Development. It was bedecked with the most beautiful and expensive decorations she had ever seen.

She was dressed in the finest robes made from the finest fabric given to her by Draco Malfoy himself, holding a glass of wine in her hands.

“Bad year, Ms. Granger, very bad year indeed,” said Mr. Van Bonham, whom she had come across while she was trying to avoid some very stubborn journalists. “The nameless condition that plagued your little friend... It’s spreading all over the world, it seems. We’ve had the most number of sick people this year. Over a hundred and fifty blokes compared to the last.”

“That can’t be possible,” she said, stunned by his words. “If I remember correctly, Dennis’ condition is very rare— 1 to 1 billion.”

“It’s spreading quickly,” he said seriously. “We don’t know what the cause is. We don’t have a cure. I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to make another potion...”

“Of course. I would love to help,” she said sincerely.

“Would you really?” He clapped his hands together and sighed in relief. He looked at her with respect and admiration. “I cannot thank you enough for this. You are a kind soul. My boy, Draco, is truly lucky to have you. He’s here somewhere, yes?”

“Excuse me, Mr. Van Bonham—” a man interrupted before she could answer. “The Minister of Magic would like to have a word with you.”

“Yes, yes, I’ll be right there,” he said, gesturing with his hand. He smiled at her again, before turning to leave for the Minister of Magic. “Please send Draco my regards.” He drifted away.

She really admired that man.

It was a time of celebration, a tribute to the sacrifices and hardships of the Unexhibitables. The decorations and food and dancing were all for them. They had one every year, the Oracle ball. Everyone worth knowing was here, intellectuals and well-known potions masters, wandmakers and historians alike, even the great Harry Potter and his wife. It was supposed to be a beautiful evening, a chance to dance and relax. They were being awarded for all the help they’d given to the public.

She wasn’t really excited about the ball anyways, what she was excited about was the Denovorum. She had finally finished making it after months of hard work and careful calculations. She just had to wait another day before it was safe for Dennis to drink it. She was finally able to breathe...

That was until she saw Astoria Greengrass, her dark brown hair and dark brown eyes, smirking at her, looking menacing in her bright red dress.

Normally, she would've ignored Greengrass, but tonight there was something different about her actions. It was the puzzling way she'd looked at her that caused Hermione to experience terrible sensations pulling at her gut. She almost immediately assumed something horrible was about to happen.

Astoria turned around, walked quietly away from the crowd, and headed towards the staircases.

She hiked up her skirt and followed, feeling her heart throbbing wildly.

"Ms. Granger!" a voice called out to her. Madam Dumass appeared beside her, rushing to keep up. "Where are you going? The awarding ceremony hasn't even started!"

"I'll be right back. I'm just going to get some air," she said hurriedly. She couldn't stop to explain. Astoria was up to something and knowing that made her skin crawl. Whatever it was, she had to stop Astoria.

She hurried towards Greengrass, climbed the staircases, and chased her until she found the woman entering a laboratory.

"What are you doing?" Hermione yelled as soon as she entered the laboratory as well, closing the door behind her.

Hermione's face contorted in horror. *No.* She stepped closer but Astoria sent a curse her way, stopping her in her tracks.

Astoria was standing very near the Denovorum with a victorious look on her face, wand at the ready.

"Don't come any closer," Astoria warned, threatening to sabotage the potion behind her.

"Don't do this," Hermione whispered... *pleaded*. "It's me you want, not the potion. People's lives are on the line—"

"Don't give me that bullshit, mudblood!" she said loudly, smiling a wicked smile. There was a thrilling madness painted on her gorgeous face, a fire burning in her dark eyes. She was staring at Hermione, her expression a bridge between obsession and desperation. "Do you honestly believe I give a damn about other filth? They're all beneath me!"

"Astoria—"

She aimed another hex at Hermione, slicing her left shoulder. She hissed in pain, but she ignored the bleeding cut. She threw hexes back at Astoria. She couldn't let her mess that potion up. *For Dennis.*

Her heart was racing. *She mustn't. Dennis would die.*

"I'll never win—never win as long as you're here to spoil the fun for me," she remarked cruelly. "Well, now I'll spoil the fun for y—"

"You don't know what you're doing!" she screamed at Astoria. "You think this is some sort of game! I'm not doing this to be better than you. This has nothing to do with you!"

Astoria did nothing but laugh at her face. She sent another dangerous hex. "Look at you, trying to make it seem like you're here to make friends! You're always stealing people away

from me with your deceiving charm and your perfect little self! But I know what you are..."

"THIS WON'T SOLVE ANYTHI—"

"OF COURSE IT WILL! Don't you see, Granger? Can't you get it inside your stupid mind? It all started with this potion. They loved you more when you started making this potion! They loved you more than they loved me! That's why this potion needs to be destroyed. After this is over, no one will love you! NO ONE! THEY'LL FINALLY UNDERSTAND, GRANGER! THEY'LL FINALLY SEE YOU FOR WHAT YOU REALLY ARE! YOU'RE NOTHING WITHOUT THIS POTION! YOU'RE FILTH AND YOU'RE NOTHING!"

And she turned her back, without warning, she tried to thrust the cauldron to the ground.

Anger rushed through Hermione's veins. She hated this woman and her destructive personality, her thirst for power and fame. Hermione sent another spell, preventing the Denovorum from spilling empty.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

And by some miracle, she disarmed Greengrass in time. She managed to blast the cow to the other side of the wall, similar to what she'd done to Vasil Krum.

The cow screamed in anger and fell hard on the ground.

But Astoria was not to be underestimated. She was smarter than she let on. The spell Hermione cast on her wasn't enough to knock her unconscious. She sent another spell, a wandless one, but it wasn't aimed at Hermione this time.

It ricocheted off the glass window before Hermione could counter it, blasted the cauldron, causing all the contents of the potion to slip away forever.

"NO!"

Astoria was laughing like a madwoman once more, laughing like she was Bellatrix Lestrange herself. "YOU LOSE GRANGER! YOU—!"

Hermione kept sending unfriendly hexes at her, letting her rage get the best of her. *Dennis.* She blinked back tears.

Astoria summoned her wand, attempted to escape Hermione's wrath but someone cursed her before she could apparate to safety.

Always her dark knight coming to her rescue, Draco was beside her again. *But it was too late.* The Denovorum...

Astoria's screams resounded throughout the laboratory, but Hermione did not hear them. She didn't know what had happened. The surroundings blurred around her. She was breathing so fast and so hard, all the while her thoughts were telling her how much she had messed things up.

She had failed him. She had failed Dennis.

The screams became louder and louder. Draco hadn't lifted the curse. It was only at that time that Hermione had realized Draco was using the Cruciatus Curse on Astoria without

remorse.

“This is what happens when you let them live, Princess,” Draco told her in a relaxed whisper. She turned her back on him and tried to shut him out. “They break you.”

“I-I can make another one,” she insisted, but her voice cracked. Her eyes were watering with tears, because the truth was she could indeed make another one...

But Dennis would be long dead by the time she was finished. “Draco, stop.”

“She deserves it,” he said, unaffected. “I should’ve killed her. I could kill her right—”

“No!” she said moving to stop him, her panic setting in.

“Why not? Help me understand, Princess,” he said furiously, grabbing her by the shoulder roughly. “Tell me why I shouldn’t, when she destroyed something you’ve so worked hard on. Why do you still want her to live? Won’t you feel better if she disappeared from the face of the earth? Won’t you?”

“I would,” she stuttered, feeling the guilt as soon as the words left her lips. “I would...”

“Then why don’t you just *let me kill her?*” he said through gritted teeth, tightening his grip on her forearm, making her hiss in pain. “It’ll be really eas—”

“It wouldn’t be right!” she retaliated, fearing the demented look on his face. “It’s better if she disappeared in my life, but not this way! Not because you killed her!”

He stared at her in disbelief. As if he couldn’t believe she was letting Greengrass get away so easily after all the horrible things she’d done.

“Please,” she whispered faintly. “*You promised.*”

Eventually, he was forced to lower his wand.

To release some of her pent up anger, Hermione walked over to the unconscious cow and punched her face as hard as she possibly could. It probably hurt her fist more than it hurt Greengrass, but it felt damn good.

All of a sudden, they heard an earsplitting explosion from downstairs.

“*Merlin*—what was that?”

She felt the strong force of it as the floor shook violently beneath them. She tried to rush out the door, only to find that it was locked.

“Princess,” she heard Draco say from behind her. She tried to unlock the door with her wand but it was useless.

“Draco, help me open th—”

Another loud explosion came from downstairs. The walls trembled at the impact.

Blood rushed through her veins. It took her a while before she remembered there were people down there, *people she cared about*. She became hysterical the moment she heard them screaming wildly. “We have to go. *We have to go now—*”

“I don’t think you should,” he said calmly. “I think you should stay here, where it’s safe.”

The moment his voice broke off, Hermione became perfectly still. She tuned out the screaming voices and focused her attention on him. “What?”

He had his hands tucked in his pockets. He looked unruffled, his features a blank canvas. He stalked closer, but she ran away from him in alarm. His eyes flashed in annoyance at her evasiveness.

“There’s been a break-in, sweetheart. The Death Eaters penetrated the underground vaults. They used muggle explosions,” he said.

Hermione feared the abrupt eeriness of his demeanor. She didn’t like this. She didn’t like this at all.

“How—how do you know all this?”

His lips tugged upward into another deviously handsome grin. He took another step forward, forcing her to run to the other side of the table, away from him.

“I told them how to do it,” he said. “It was me.”

Hermione didn’t actually see him moving towards her. He stood across her one moment and in front of her the next. He pushed her roughly onto the table, standing between her legs.

“Let me go,” she hissed, her voice rising. She fought against his vice-like grip. “Let go, you—”

“I don’t think I will,” Draco clucked his tongue, taking her wand from her before she could stop him. He towered over her, his body pressed against hers. He wiped the tears forming in her eyes and gently kissed her cheek softly.

She thought of how much she wanted to hate him, she really did, but she couldn’t. She just couldn’t.

“Just stay here until it’s over.”

Until what was over?

She never got a chance to ask because in a blink of an eye, he disappeared.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Okay, that’s it. You have to wait for the next one again, which will be out... well I’m not sure actually... It took me so long to update because this is the beginning of the end.

Yes, sad to say, the next chapter is the last one...

I hope I hear from you darlings. Be safe :)

The Final Chapter

I am sorry for the delay. I know I had a deadline to meet but my Final exams came two weeks early and I had to study. It was a matter of life and death! But look, I passed everything! Yay. Anyways we finally made it here so there's no need to dwell on my—ehem—2 month lateness.

Warning: Dark themes and something else...

This ending might disappoint you but that's okay.

I encourage you to read everything, down to the punctuation marks. Don't skip. Everything matters, every line and every word. I had placed them in there for a reason. Skipping parts would destroy the story for you.

Pooja (murtagh799) is my first and only beta and I want to thank her deeply for putting up with me. I would never have finished this without her. You are wonderful, you are.

READ THE HUNGER GAMES BY SUZANNE COLLINS. It's my new obsession.

I thought a lot about the first line and I've decided to take one from my own short story. This one's from me.

Here we go, love. Take a deep breath...

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

The Final Chapter part 1

And he once had a gaping hole in his chest, but not anymore.

A bomb. A weapon of mass destruction set to explode in the underground vaults where precious things were stored. Muggles were clever. Magic wouldn't have stood a chance.

She would never have suspected him to have thought of something so muggle, so completely unlike him. But then again, that was just how he operated. She could never understand how his mind worked. He had been here only a while ago, showing his concern for her after Astoria Greengrass had completely destroyed her potion. Hermione felt a horrible sensation in her gut and a strong urge to throw up. A while later, she was retching all the contents of her stomach onto the floor.

Reality had finally crashed down on her, shocking her to the core. The Denovorum was gone. Dennis was going to die, and Draco... Draco had betrayed her to run off with the Death Eaters.

It was unfair that such horrible things had happened all at once. She couldn't understand why Draco would betray her like that. Had he been planning this from the beginning? He had made a promise to her, had assured her that he wouldn't kill anyone anymore. He hadn't killed Astoria because of that promise.

Perhaps he wasn't *really* betraying her. Perhaps he just wanted to keep her away from harm. But she knew this was all wishful thinking. Nothing she did seemed to silence the thoughts in her head but at least her thoughts were a fine distraction from reality.

The more she thought, the less she heard the screams from below.

She paced around the laboratory, Astoria's wand in hand. Draco had taken her wand, but by sheer dumb luck he'd forgotten about Greengrass's. Hermione had been so relieved to have found the wand. She'd had no second thoughts prying it from Astoria's perfectly-manicured, unconscious hands.

But the odds were against her. Draco had planned that she stay here, and he had planned it well. Apparition wouldn't work— nothing would. She was stuck here until he reversed whatever curse he had placed around the perimeter. There was nothing she could do but send a Patronus to find Harry and spend the next few minutes waiting in silence.

She soon realized the flaw in her plan, thinking that maybe Harry had his hands full with Death Eaters, and as a consequence he'd take a long time getting here. Or maybe he was injured... or maybe he hadn't gotten her Patronus, or maybe a stray spell had, had...

Ugh. This was maddening. Pretty soon, she couldn't ignore the screams anymore. She let out an anxious groan and slammed her shoulder against the door of the laboratory repeatedly, knowing that it wouldn't budge no matter how many times she tried to force it open.

Finally, she gave up and slammed her back to the concrete hard. She let her body slump, slowly descending to the cold floor. She brought her hands to her face and murmured obscenities to the air. She kept thinking how much she was going to make Draco suffer for doing this. Revenge would be sweet. Him and his bloody bombs.

Wait—that's it!

She let out a loud gasp and jumped up from her crouched position. Frantically, she searched the laboratory for materials: *lithium, tritium, deuterium, thorium...*

Magic wouldn't stand a chance.

Running down a flight of staircases was easier with her dress ripped a few inches above her knees. It didn't take long for her to reach the lobby where the ball had been taking place. The huge space, once bedecked with the finest flower gardens and fountains, was barely recognizable. It was now a barren wasteland destroyed by the Death Eaters. Gone were the banners and the decorations and colorful lights, but what was left was a battleground with blood staining the floors and dead bodies scattered everywhere.

It was as if she was reliving the Great Battle all over again.

There were duels occurring all around her and once or twice she had to duck as a stray spell almost came into contact with her skin. A few Aurors were leading the remaining guests to safety. She saw Padma fending off some of the Death Eaters with complicated spells.

“Hermione!” Another stray spell came hurtling towards her, too quick for her to jump out of its way. Suddenly, she was tackled to the ground by someone. She didn’t know who until she caught a glimpse of bright red hair. “Merlin, are you alright?” Hermione merely nodded, panting.

“I was supposed to help you out of the Laboratory, but there’s been a delay!”

Two Death Eaters had seen them and were now showering them with jets of green light. They searched for cover as more and more hexes soared just above their heads, barely missing them by inches. They jumped to an overturned table, firing their own spells at the two Death Eaters now hidden out of view behind the columns.

“I’m alright, Ginny,” she whispered, trying to catch her breath. She fired another spell from behind their cover and knocked a Death Eater unconscious. “I got out just fine. Where’s Harry?”

“He’s trailing after Malfoy in the underground vaults,” she replied. ‘The other Unexhibitables were sent home to safety, although some of them weren’t so lucky.’ She frowned. “Luna’s the only one who stayed to help Harry find his way. It’s dangerous down there.”

“But I have to go. I have to stop Malfoy.”

“Are you mad? It’s too dangerous. Harry told me not to—” But Hermione didn’t want to listen. She peeked from their cover once more, only to find the other Death Eater had what seemed to be a bomb in his hand. Out of reflex, she grabbed Ginny by the arm and dragged her away to safety.

“Watch out!”

A loud bang sounded, so loud it had rendered her temporarily deaf, exactly from the place where they had been crouching only moments previously. The force of the explosion had thrown them both backwards. Hermione crashed painfully to the ground, her back grazing against the cold pavement. She let out a loud groan from the sudden pain. The air was filled with black smoke, dust, and debris, making it impossible to see anything.

She let herself lie on the floor, coughing from the fumes that had entered her lungs.

Her body was aching everywhere, but she had to move and get out of there.

“Ginny!” she yelled through the blur of smoke, nervously. “Ginny!”

“Over here!”

She forced herself to roll onto her stomach and crawl towards the sound of the voice, relieved to hear her friend alive. Hermione’s skin scraped against the rocks, but she forced her body to keep moving.

Ginny was lying face down on the ground and clutching her stomach with both hands. Hermione flung herself beside Ginny immediately and rolled the girl onto her back. Ginny’s

eyes were closed tight and her expression was one of immense pain. Only then did Hermione notice the big gash on her stomach, oozing red blood all over. She cringed at the sight of it, suddenly remembering Viktor and how she had watched him die.

Slowly, Ginny opened her eyes and grinned sheepishly, something akin to what Fred Weasley might've done had he been in the same situation.

"Nothing a little healing charm won't fix," she said as-a-matter-of-fact. Hermione didn't need to be told twice. She was already healing Ginny's huge slash and making quite a bit of progress.

The wound was about an inch deep; just blow her breast, crimson red against Ginny's pale complexion. Bits of her skin were sticking out in a jagged manner, and parts had even been ripped from her body when the wound had been made. Hermione started removing the detached skin as carefully as she could.

"Do you know there's a black hole in the Malfoy Manor?" Hermione whispered, trying so hard to keep her voice from cracking. She knew that the only way she could distract the girl from the pain was by talking to her. *Make her think of something else.*

"Yeah?" Ginny said in a ragged voice, smiling slightly again. She looked like she was going to pass out at any second. She was trying to fight for consciousness and talking helped a lot. "How did he manage to get one in there?"

"They're the result of a Denovorum potion gone wrong," Hermione said. She was in the middle of cleaning the wound with her magic, feeling so relieved that the wound wasn't as bad as Viktor's had been. Even with her healer training, Hermione's hands were shaking so much that she had to make an effort to keep them steady. "One of the reasons why Denovorums are so rare. A simple mistake will create a black hole. You see, the ingredients are so powerful that an imbalance would be deadly."

"*You're joking.* You mean to tell me," Ginny breathed. As the blood slowly disappeared, her ragged voice was returning to normal again. Hermione had finished cleaning the wound and had now proceeded to seal it. "Malfoy tried to make a Denovorum?"

"I'm not sure if it was him. Hold onto me, it'll help," Hermione replied. Ginny held her left hand tight. 'There've been rumors that the Malfoy Manor had a black hole hidden inside it for generations now.' Ginny let out a loud groan of pain as the healing charm worked its magic. Her nails dug into Hermione's skin, drawing blood. Ignoring the pain of her iron grip, Hermione continued working on her raw wounds. "Listen Ginny, I have to do this. I have to go down there... It's—" she reinforced the healing charm which earned another loud groan from Ginny. Her left hand felt like it would break from Ginny's grip. "I'm the only one who can stop him."

She was still bleeding slightly. Hermione tried to stop the blood from coming out, but it was not enough. There was only so much a volunteer healer could do. Despite this, the healing charm had done a lot for her wound. A few minutes more and Ginny would've bled to death. Hermione tore fabric from her already ripped dress robes to serve as bandages.

"You have to go back," Hermione said when she'd finally finished.

“No,” Ginny said harshly. She pushed herself away from Hermione and tried to stand up. “I’ll stay here and fight them.”

“Merlin, Ginny, look at you!” Hermione said loudly, getting irritated with her stubbornness. She was really worried. She didn’t want anyone else to get hurt. “You’re injured. You need to go to St. Mungo’s, you won’t last a—”

“You’ll need a distraction, won’t you?” Ginny said urgently, ignoring Hermione’s outburst. Blood was still leaking from her stomach, staining her ripped dress robes. Hermione tried to ignore the fact that Ginny was right: that she did need a distraction. But her thoughts were in a knotted mess, filled with Snape’s voice telling her that she had to fix Draco at all costs. *At all costs or she’d be sorry.* “To get to Malfoy, you have to get past these Death Eaters! You said so yourself, you’re the only one who can stop him! I’ll distract them! I can, too—”

Before she could even finish, hooded cloaks and white masks appeared out of the darkness, moving in quick pace towards them. More Death Eaters. Hermione raised her wand to fire spells, but Ginny, with raw willpower, began pulling her to the entrance of the Vaults. When she tried to protest, Ginny only pulled her all the more violently, literally dragging her feet to get her to move.

The walls were trembling all around them, crumbs of concrete fell onto their heads. The beams that supported the ceilings looked like they were going to collapse any second.

“Go Hermione!” she yelled, a slight tinge of desperation in her voice. Hermione was at a loss, torn between staying and leaving. She cast more spells towards the Death Eaters (there were about 10 of them). A spell grazed her shoulder but she ignored the pain. Ginny couldn’t possibly... “I’ll buy you some time!”

“You’re bonkers if you think I’ll leave you here! Come with me—!”

“JUST GO!” she shouted.

Before Hermione could argue, Ginny fired a spell directly at the beams that supported the high ceilings.

The effect was immediate. Large chunks of concrete descended with a boisterous sound. More dust thickened the already polluted air. Hermione ran towards the entrance as a huge part of the ceiling collapsed between them, separating her from Ginny.

She thought she was going to be buried alive.

“Ginny!”

It went on for seconds, but it felt like a lifetime. It took a while before the concrete stopped falling and the fog to clear up.

“Where are you!” she bellowed, coughing so much and trying to find a way through the rocks and boulders hysterically. “GINNY!”

But Ginny didn’t respond to her calls this time.

“GINNY!”

The last Hermione heard from her was her scream— her earsplitting tortured scream.

And then silence.

She couldn't find a way back.

The paths had been too obscured, too wrecked by the rocks and boulders; the only way out had been to continue towards the vaults. Apparition wasn't allowed inside as well.

The first level had been destroyed completely like the lobby, but she hadn't found any sign of Hufflepuff's flower anywhere. The Death Eaters had probably taken it for their own gain. Goodness knows where they would use a plant that nullified magic.

Now she was running towards the second level, equipped with only her determination, her knowledge of spells, and Astoria's wand. The place was like the Room of Hidden Things at Hogwarts. All around her, artifacts were displayed out in the open. She maneuvered her way through them, taking care not to touch anything.

And what had happened to Ginny in the hands of the Death Eaters? *Injured. Tortured.* Hermione tried very hard not to think of her, because if she did she would surely burst to tears.

She didn't want to process the events of the evening. Her mind was rejecting them, repressing them. She didn't want to believe that Ginny was dead. In her mind, Ginny was still up there fighting off the Death Eaters, receiving help from the other Aurors who had only just arrived.

She was not dead.

Now is not the time to cry. There would be a time to mourn, but not now. Right now, she had to keep going.

Remembering that there would be flesh-eating monsters on the sixth level, Hermione took a bottle of Puti Elixer from the many artifacts and tucked it inside the pocket of her dress robes.

She was thankful that the second level was only a storage space for the more rare of the artifacts that weren't as dangerous. Finally, Hermione cast a strong warming charm over her skin to prepare herself for the snowstorm at level three.

Any other witch or wizard would have had trouble getting through each level alive, but as she was an Unexhibitible, she already knew the preparations needed for each level and the quickest shortcuts to get through them safely.

"You're almost there, Hermione," she would tell herself every five minutes. She would tell it to herself after each step. It was her mantra from the piles of snow forming under her feet and eventually after each step, into grains of sand on the next level.

On this level was a stone, a fire stone that could bring heat and sand to any place, day and night, for eternity. Said stone was hidden somewhere in the forth level, while an ice stone was hidden in the third.

As she dashed off through the underground snowstorm of level three and sand storm of level four, she couldn't help but think of what she were to face once she reached the seventh level. It had been her task to stop Draco since the beginning, but apparently she hadn't done such a good job of it. She should've spent more time with him, should've showed him how much she cared. She could've done so much more.

But would that have been enough? She was sure she had seen Draco somewhere in his mask of indifference, but what made her so certain she could fix him? For all she knew, this lack of emotion was a permanent thing. Maybe he was too broken, too scarred from the torture that Voldemort had put him through. Maybe Snape was wrong. Maybe Draco had already turned into a monster.

No. She mustn't lose hope. Hope was the only thing she could cling to at the moment. She had to believe in Draco. She was the only one he had. Who else would believe in him if not her?

At last, Hermione had reached a hole in the middle of the desert. They called it the rabbit hole. It was the entrance to the rainforest on level five.

She closed her eyes and jumped.

When she opened her eyes, a different scene appeared before her. Tall trees surrounded the perimeter, different plants never seen before by human eyes. There was a tree with purple leaves and grass with blinking lights. The dessert and snow have gone, replaced by the rainforest. She scanned the place for any signs of movement. Her gaze fell on the vines not far from her; the Vinewhip bushes Astoria had brought from Russia.

Taking care to avoid the large vines studded with thorns and leaves, she made her way around them and started heading for the entrance to level six.

She was quiet, so quiet, like a shadow in the night, so as not to disturb the forest where monstrous animals dwelled that could attack her any second. As she reached the clearing, she heard different people shouting words, probably spells, not far from her.

Behind a couple of huge trees, she found Harry and Luna battling more Death Eaters. They were clearly outnumbered, about fifteen to two. Hermione hid behind the trees to keep herself out of view from the ongoing battle. One of the fifteen was Blaise Zabini, standing still beside one of the trees, wand limp to the side, simply enjoying the show.

Hermione felt anger course through her veins at the sight of him, but she didn't have time to think of him. She had to save Harry and Luna.

"Hey! Hey you!" she yelled at the Death Eaters. The spells stopped. All of them turned to look at her. "Remember me? Hermione Granger! The mudblood married to your precious Voldemort's heir!"

Angered, they abandoned Harry and Luna immediately and dashed after her. She bolted, forcing her legs to run the fastest they could to whatever destination. She had intended to distract them from Harry and Luna, but now she had no idea how to get away from them.

Hexes were fired at her from all directions. She cried out as one hex stung her back, two more stung her legs that almost sent her crashing to the ground.

“Hermione, watch out!” she heard her name being called out. But the voice was washed away by the loud bawls, the screams of anguish of the Death Eaters. She turned around, only to find them being crushed to pieces by the Vinewhip bushes she had evaded.

She stared in horror as the vines bound the Death Eaters to the ground, preventing any means of escape. They were thick vines and they hungered for human flesh. She fired curses to get the vines off, but it was no use. There was so much blood spurting out everywhere, the thorns piercing their skin, their eyes, their mouths. She heard their bones crack, one by one.

And then her vision blurred and her feet threatened to collapse. They were all dead. She had caused it to happen.

“There’s nothing you could do,” Luna said to her. She was immediately at Hermione side, pulling her to her feet.

She couldn’t stop staring at the bloodbath in front of her. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Minutes passed with Luna trying to fix the hexes on her back and legs.

“Hold still,” said Luna. The healing charm raked over her stings, while she fought to stay conscious.

Meanwhile, Harry had gotten Blaise Zabini cornered. His wand was aimed straight at his heart and this time he wouldn’t miss. Blaise would not retaliate. His hand holding the wand remained limp at his side. He didn’t even try to fight back.

“You’re with them,” Hermione breathed, eyeing him untrusting. Luna was helping her to her feet, still working on her stings. “You helped orchestrate this.”

“Why do you always assume it’s my fault when it’s always Draco who’s to blame?” he retorted. He stared at the Death Eaters killed by the vinewhip bushes in disgust. “It’s not as if I could plan something like this, Hermione. I was neutral in the Final Battle, or have you forgotten?”

Hermione’s resolve threatened to break but she stood her ground. She kept seeing Ginny, hearing her screams in her head. Blaise still didn’t know she was dead. “What’s he going to do? At the ghost chamber, what does he want?”

Blaise gazed at her eyes intensely as if trying to decide whether to tell her the truth, completely ignoring Harry and Luna. Her patience was waning. She pulled away from Luna and fired a quick curse, but he had blocked it. She fired more but he kept dodging. He was always on the defense mode. He still wouldn’t attack.

“Tell me or I’ll kill you!”

“I doubt it. I’m the only lead you have at the moment,” Blaise reasoned solemnly. “I’d say I’m pretty important—”

“Have you forgotten who killed Voldemort, Zabini?” Harry sneered, firing curses of his own. “I could surely do the same to someone like y—”

“Ah, but didn’t you know, Potter?” he said, giving Harry a look of contempt. “The ghost chamber can bring Voldemort back to life.”

Luna gasped. Harry’s jaw dropped. Hermione stopped firing spells at once.

“What?” Words could not explain the shock and anger she had felt at what she’d heard. She strode over to where Blaise stood and with blind fury grabbed what she could of his collar. “What do you mean!” she hissed.

Hermione gripped the edge of her wand tighter, her wrath causing red sparks to emit from the tip. She had one curse, one particular curse that would suit the occasion. It was on the tip of her tongue.

But Blaise didn’t raise his wand still and it made her even angrier.

“He’s trying to stop it,” he whispered, finally. He had a look of pure disbelief on his face, as though the very thought of it was madness. “Draco, he’s—he’s trying to stop it.”

“He’s lying!” Harry yelled. “Stun him, Hermione! Stun him now!”

But Hermione only tried to search for signs, anything that might tell her that Blaise was lying. And she remembered that Blaise had never lied to her. Not once.

“Draco’s trying to stop Voldemort from rising again,” he whispered again. She let go of him, a mixture of shock and disbelief registering in her features.

A minute passed without any of them saying anything. Harry was having trouble absorbing the information. Luna was quiet. Hermione just looked lost. Furious, Blaise grabbed both her arms roughly, shaking her hard.

“Didn’t you hear me, Granger? Draco’s trying to stop it! He’s trying to stop it for you! Believe me!”

She wasn’t sure what to believe. Everything was happening so fast; she felt like screaming. Not knowing what to do, she turned towards Luna for assurance, who gave her an encouraging nod with a twinkle in her eyes.

“I—yes,” Hermione breathed finally. “I believe you.”

When she looked back at Blaise, he let her go immediately. His fists were clenched and he was trembling. It was the first time in years that she’d seen him this angry. The last time was when the newspapers had announced his parents’ execution. He thrust a glass vial into Hermione’s hands. Hermione recognized it immediately, the glass vial that contained the sample of her first finished Denovorum.

“He wanted me to give this to him tonight. Draco’s not going to survive down in that chamber and he knows it. I tried to talk him out of it but he wouldn’t listen. It wasn’t an illness that attacked Creevey, Granger,” Blaise said in all seriousness. “It was a curse.”

The Final Chapter part 2

“The nameless condition that plagued your little friend... It’s spreading all over the world, it seems. We’ve had the most number of sick people this year. Over a hundred and fifty blokes compared to the last.”

“A curse—w-what—”

“Slytherin’s Curse. It’s a rare curse used in the Dark Arts. It’s so undetectable and unheard of, the wizarding world thought it as a natural disease for so long. It sucks the magic out of people. Used by Salazar Slytherin generations ago to gain more power. Voldemort cast the same, only a more powerful one, affecting hundreds of people, draining their life sources to feed his own soul.”

“Sweet Merlin,” Luna gasped. Hermione stared at the ground in disbelief. After all the years she’d spent making the Denovorum for what she thought to be an illness... What do you do if the truth suddenly distorts everything you’ve once known?

“Because Voldemort needed power for his soul to cross from the world of the dead to the living. Draco has known this the moment he became heir,” Blaise said. “It was his task to bring Voldemort back to life, to bring a vessel for his soul once he emerges from the arch... But after you bonded—” he paused and closed his eyes, calming himself a little. Hermione could only keep staring. She was at a loss of what to do, what to think. All the revelations—it was overwhelming. “After you bonded, Hermione, he changed. I think he felt something. So he decided to abandon his task and to do whatever it took to keep it from happening.”

“I told you to trust him,” Luna said from behind her.

“He knew there were other Death Eaters— knew there were more that might have been assigned the same task, should he fail. He knew that the only way he could find them was by pretending he was still on their side. So he had to pretend, all this time.”

“He could’ve asked for my help. He could’ve told me.”

“Would you have believed him?” he spat, chuckling darkly. “Even if you did, would Potter, the Ministry, the public— would they have believed him? He had killed too many people and he knew that if he were to come back, he would surely be sent to Azkaban. So he took matters into his own hands.”

“He had found the only counter to be the Denovorum. But he couldn’t make it properly, so when the Daily Prophet announced that you were making a Denovorum, he couldn’t believe his luck. He insisted that he had to come back. But honestly, I think all he really wanted was to see you again.”

Suddenly everything started making sense— why Draco had paid for the Denovorum. And the black hole in the Malfoy Manor— it was probably an attempt to make the potion. A failed attempt— but an attempt all the same.

“So the Denovorum was for Voldemort...” Harry said, staring at Luna in amazement. Luna smiled back dreamily. “He funded Hermione’s projects so he could destroy Voldemort.”

“Yes, Potter. And to see her engaged to Krum... Draco was so angry, he did nothing to stop their deaths,” Blaise continued. “He is not yet fully recovered. There is still some monstrosity left in him, if not more. But it’s a wonder he’s kept it tamed inside him just because of his love for you.”

By this time, Hermione couldn't help but let a few tears leak from her eyes, but she wiped them clean furiously. She stared at Blaise again who was watching her with curious eyes, like he had done at Hogwarts so many years ago, wondering what her next act would be.

"What can we do to help him?" Hermione said finally, a new strength overcoming her. If Draco could be so strong, so would she. She wore the glass vial around her neck and with it, her new resolve.

"I'll tell you on the way. Right now we have to get to the sixth level," Blaise said, gesturing to them. He started running towards the way out while they followed closely behind.

So this was it.

After years of planning and scheming it would all lead to this.

A group of Death Eaters positioned around the Ghost Chamber, led by him, Voldemort's heir. The scene depressed him.

Now that he had successfully gathered Voldemort's followers from the corners of the world, he could kill them one by one. He wouldn't let any of them leave this place alive. To be certain once and for all that none of them would attempt to bring Voldie back to life again once Draco killed them.

And if Draco was lucky, he might escape this place alive. If he was lucky, he might see her smiling again.

It was a fool's hope, but it gave him strength somehow.

"What happens now, my Lord?" asked Rowle.

A wisp of smoke emerged from the Ghost arch. It was so small that he was the only one who had seen it: Voldemort's soul.

"Now we wait."

Hermione had always thought the sixth level to be the most dangerous level out of all the levels of the SFOWW. It was a huge maze, similar to the third task in the Triwizarding tournament. This maze would have been safe on a normal basis, when the Unexhibitables had protocols to follow to keep them from harm. But right now they had no protocol, no nets of safety. They had to be very careful if they wanted to make it out of this alive.

The maze often changed and separated people from each other, too.

She stared at Blaise again, not knowing what to say to him. Only a while ago had she told them of Ginny's unfortunate death. There had been silent sobs from Luna and her, a loud scream of despair from Harry, and Blaise had yet to utter a single word.

They were a wreck for a long time, but once Harry had calmed down, he insisted they kept going. Ginny would have wanted them to, he had said. Already, they were in the middle of

the huge obstacle, with Harry in front, Luna closely behind him, and Blaise and her shortly after.

Hermione wanted to talk to Blaise, to tell him it was alright, anything to make him feel better. But she didn't really know Blaise the way Ginny had. Once, when Blaise had been angry, he had thrown a vase repeatedly at the wall after he'd fixed it with his wand and Hermione could do nothing about it. She was horrible at trying to cheer people up (besides Harry, Ron, and Draco, of course).

“*Point me,*” Harry said once more while he held his wand at the palm of his hand. It pointed north, so they kept going. Three times, they had encountered dead ends and once they even felt like they were going around in circles.

“I-if you need anyone—” Hermione stammered as they walked, with a hushed voice so Harry and Luna wouldn't hear them, “to talk to, I—”

Blaise only stared at her with his usual stoic expression. “I'm fine.”

There was a strange sort of emptiness in his dark eyes. It was as if something once alive had left him and now he was hollow. She didn't know what to do. She opened her mouth to say something but the words died on her throat.

“Do any of you hear anything?” Harry whispered.

And then she heard it: a faint buzzing sound a short distance away from them. She panicked, knowing all too well what they were. She saw them swarm at the other side of the maze. Fishes. But there was no water in sight—they were flying.

“RUN!” she yelled at them. And they were lucky to have done so quickly because the fishes (looking a great deal like piranhas) soared towards them at an unforgiving speed. Blaise and her fired spells but there were too many of them.

The buzzing sounds were getting louder and louder. Harry navigated towards the maze. When they turned right, they couldn't see Harry or Luna in front of them anymore. *Maze changes paths remember?* So both she and Blaise had no choice but to keep going, turning left, right, and left again. She hoped to Merlin that Harry and Luna were safe. Finally, she saw light at the end of the path.

“Hurry!” Blaise bellowed.

Blaise was a quicker runner and he had grabbed her hand so she wouldn't fall far behind. A few fishes had caught up with them and were gnawing the flesh on her shoulders and a few got on her hair. She couldn't even stop to feel the pain.

They had only a few feet to go. She felt a rush and pushed her body to the limit. She was running beside Blaise now. And they almost made it out, but he tripped on one of the roots and collapsed carelessly to the ground. Hermione held him with both hands, pulled him to get him to his feet, because the fishes were already surrounding them, biting every part of skin they could reach. Somewhere along the stabs of pain, she heard both her and Blaise screaming. But she kept pulling and would not let go of him.

Next thing she saw was his bloody, almost skinless, arm raising his wand and pointing at her. Next thing she felt was the strong force of his magic throwing her backwards, to the end

of the maze, safe, because the flying fishes could never reach her from there.

But she could never reach Blaise from there, too.

Scratches and torn flesh could be found all over her body.

Her hair had been reduced to a few inches and blood was leaking from all her wounds. Hermione took the Puti Elixir that she had placed in her pocket a while ago and drank it. It took a while before the elixir could salvage what was left of her skin.

She was in level seven now. Ginny was dead. Blaise, too. Harry and Luna were nowhere to be found.

“Hermione,” someone kept whispering to her. “Hermione.”

“Who are you?” she whispered in a daze, still feeling a slight dizziness from the elixir.

As soon as she had enough strength to move, she sat upright. Cautiously, her eyes darted in the surroundings, the emptiness of the place, and the lone archway in the middle. She was surprised to find many Death Eaters dead, pale corpses discarded on the floor.

And then, all too suddenly, she was staring at his silver eyes again.

He was only a few inches away from her, brushing her now shorter hair. She felt an odd kind of warmth and safety.

“What happened?” she asked in confusion. A searing pain attacked her head, blurring her vision a little. She clutched his robes to keep from falling to the ground.

“Voldemort killed them. Sucked the magic out of every single one,” Draco said, frowning. “That was until I killed him of course.”

Pools of grey clouded her vision. He was studying her face, searching for something in her eyes. But she had all but ceased to care. She was just so relieved to hear his words. *Safe*. She was now safe. He had broken his promise, but it was alright. Everything was going to be alright.

“It’s over,” he whispered in her ear. He was smirking; a calm smirk, so familiar but so different from what she had remembered. He pulled her towards him at once and kissed her. She relaxed, feeling a sense of euphoria from the softness of his lips. She let her arms wrap around his neck and let her dazed mind think about the gentleness of his body against hers. She felt his tongue and let him explore her mouth. She was so happy, so happy that it was over. She drank from his lips and lost herself in his warmth.

But something was different about him. Something she couldn’t figure out until the Elixir completely left her body. At once she jumped and the bond was shattered. She opened her eyes and pulled away, distanced herself from him while staring at him in absolute horror.

“You— you’re not Draco,” she said.

A devious smirk graced his features, and his eyes flashed *crimson*.

Hermione cringed at the sight of him, of Tom Riddle, Voldemort on Draco's skin. This was not Draco. He couldn't be. She couldn't look away as she used both hands to drag her mangled body backwards. But it was useless, because he stood up and sauntered towards her until he was only a few inches away again.

"Does it matter? You enjoyed kissing me a while ago, didn't you?" He laughed coldly at her horrified expression.

"Where is he?" she demanded angrily.

He squatted in front of her and grabbed a fistful of her hair roughly. "He's dead. My soul has taken over his body now. I know because I didn't feel him inside me when I kissed you."

"N-no." She struggled away from him and was awarded with a painful, stinging slap to her face.

"Do you really think that I would let you get away with defiling my heir, Hermione Granger? Do you know how disrespectful you were? All the hard work I've done to ensure that he doesn't feel even the slightest bit of love was almost put to waste! I thought he would let go of all emotions, but it seems I've made a mistake. He fell in love with *you*. And it's a lucky thing he was stupid enough to think he could destroy me. He would have never brought me back to life had he known I was going to kill you afterwards."

Drac—*Voldemort in Draco's body*, grabbed her roughly by the arm and hauled her up, forced her to look at the Death Eaters lying lifeless on the ground.

"Look at them. I own their magic now," he said coldly. "And after this day is over, I will own all the magic of those affected by Slytherin's Curse as well. Hundreds of people's power will belong to me! And no one—no one will be able to kill me—"

"Wake up!" she cried out in desperation. "Wake up, Draco! WAKE UP!"

Voldemort tossed her angrily to the floor in utter disgust. And a Cruciatus Curse engulfed her body, so powerful she saw nothing but black. She felt like Ginny must have felt being tortured by the Death Eaters. She felt like the Death Eaters must have felt being crushed to pieces by the Vinewhip bushes. She felt like Blaise had felt being eaten flesh by flesh by the piranhas.

"He will never wake up, mudblood," she heard Draco's voice, but it wasn't really Draco at all. "He's dead!"

And that was probably the worst pain of all, knowing Draco was dead. It was a pain she knew she could never accept. So in her mind, she refused to believe it. She refused to give him up.

She felt something else too. Something other than pain.

Moving seemed so impossible, but she tried to stand up anyway with whatever strength she had left. The Cruciatus curse was unbearable, stinging, stabbing, and burning her repeatedly. It was worse than anything she had ever experienced. It was the Cruciatus Curse from the power of many men. Her body parts had ceased functioning properly.

It was as though the only thing functioning properly was the dull throbbing in her chest. Her legs and arms were numb from so much pain, but her heart, she could still hear it.

And this was how she knew Draco to be alive.

She could hear his heartbeat in rhythm with hers, like a familiar song reverberating in her brain. She knew he was there, waiting for the right moment to strike back.

So she gave him an opening, pulled the glass vial she had worn around her neck and threw it at him with all the energy that she could muster...

Time seemed to have slowed down for her. Her body gave in to the pain, crumpling to a heap on the ground. She heard voices and saw different shapes and colors. She saw Viktor Krum smiling at her before dropping dead. She saw Vasil Krum and the light disappearing from his eyes. She heard Ginny screaming and Blaise casting his last spell to keep her from dying.

She didn't know if the pain had stopped. It made no difference because her body couldn't feel anything anymore.

She didn't know for how long, but hands, gentle hands were grabbing her and pulling her to a tight embrace, cradling her to sleep. She sensed warm kisses on her forehead and face and hands. She would know that gentle, affectionate touch anywhere.

"*Portus*," she heard a familiar sound. Smeared images of glasses and pink highlights appeared in her peripheral, but she couldn't remember why she was relieved to see them.

"Princess."

And she finally let the darkness swallow her whole.

Epilogue.

Whenever she would look back, even a few years later, she would still feel a slight ache in her chest. Her recollection of the things that had happened between them, the murders, the deaths, seemed only a dream, scattered glass shards in her mind. Once in a while these shards of memories would cut her and tears, instead of blood, would pour out.

Draco served a few years in Azkaban. It was a small price to pay for all the crimes he had committed. But Worden deemed it fair, considering he had suffered so much in the hands of Voldemort. Once he was released, the Wizarding World welcomed him again, especially after the Prophet had published the story of how he had stopped Voldemort's second rising.

He hadn't fully recovered, as Blaise had said. Even after his time in Azkaban, there was still a monster inside him that would probably never die. It was a permanent scar that he was burdened with for the rest of his life.

But she would be there for him this time.

Today was a Saturday morning, and they were in the lovely Malfoy Garden.

Hermione was dressed in a comfortable white sundress and her husband had one arm wrapped affectionately around her waist.

They were watching two little kids playing in the grass. One was picking flowers to put in her pale blonde, bushy hair. Her skin was porcelain white and she looked doll-like in her little pink dress. The other one was playing in a puddle of mud and smearing some on his cheeks and blond hair, the epitome of his father. But he never let the mud get into his silver eyes.

On Sundays, the Potters, (Luna and Harry, and their twin sons) would come over.

On Fridays, they would eat dinner at Grandma Brielle Zabini's place, and play with the Zabini kids.

Dennis came to visit five times a week.

Hermione loved the feel of Draco's hand in hers. She always loved holding his hand. Seven years had passed since Voldemort's death. Draco hadn't killed anyone since. He kept his promise. He still got a little jealous and possessive at times, but nothing bordering on evil anymore. Nightmares still plague him at night, but she would always be there to calm him down.

Because of this, he would often look at her for reassurance and whisper, "Tell me you love me?"

"I love you," she would respond, always, without hesitation. And he wouldn't feel so scared and alone anymore.

She would smile, too, because he loved her smiles the most.

And all was well.

Fin.